

MARGARET L. WOODS



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A VILLAGE TRAGEDY

MACMILLAN'S TWO-SHILLING LIBRARY.

Crown 8vo. Bound in Cloth.

By MRS. ALEXANDER.

The Wooing o't.
Her Dearest Foe.
The Admiral's Ward. [March 16th.
The Executor. [April 3rd.
The Freres. [April 20th.
Look Before You Leap. [May 1st.
Which Shall it Be? [May 18th.

By RHODA BROUGHTON.

Cometh Up as a Flower.
Good-Bye, Sweetheart.
Joan.
Not Wisely but Too Well.
Red as a Rose is She.
Scylla or Charybdis.
Belinda.
Doctor Cupid.
Second Thoughts.
A Beginner.
Alas!
Mrs. Bligh.
'Dear Faustina.'
Nancy.

By MARY CHOLMONDELEY.

Diana Tempest. [June 1st.

By MRS. EDWARDES.

Leah: A Woman of Fashion.
A Ball-Room Repentance. [May 18th.
Ought We to Visit Her? [June 1st.
Susan Fielding. [June 15th.

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The House by the Churchyard.

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The Haven under the Hill. [July 3rd.
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Quits! [July 3rd.
The Initials. [July 17th.
At Odds. [June 15th.

By MONTAGU WILLIAMS.

Leaves of a Life.

By MARGARET L. WOODS.

A Village Tragedy.

MACMILLAN AND CO., LTD., LONDON.

A
VILLAGE TRAGEDY

BY
MARGARET L. WOODS

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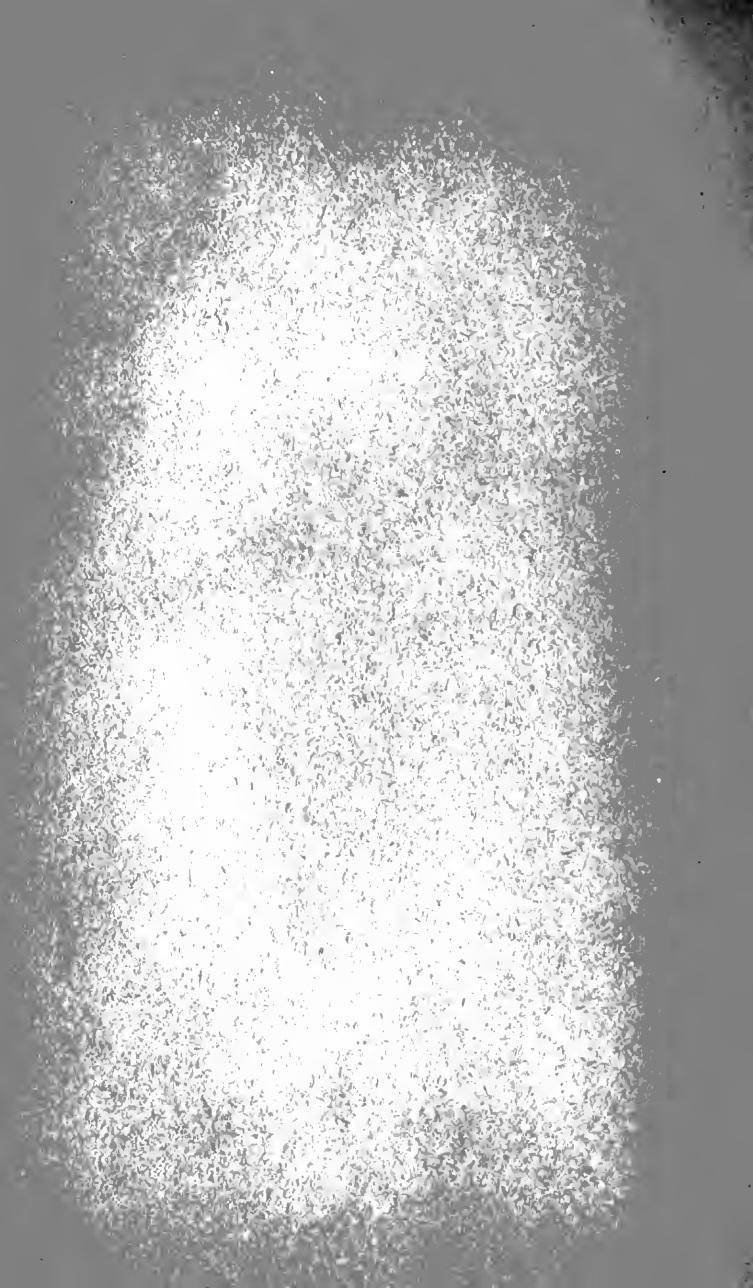
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APOLOGIA

A JEWELLED tale, an antique historie
Plucked out of darkness and the dust of kings,
Or windy song the Northern sea-maid flings
Among the mountains from the brooding sea ;
Such gifts my venturous Fancy promised thee
When to the sun he stretched his gauzy wings.
He promised thee, but other far he brings
As wingless now he wanders home to me.

Poor creeping Elf! He gathers what he can—
Herbs that each rash disdainful foot may reach,
Yet once who wore them understood the speech
Of bird and beast and all the song of Pan.
One hidden tongue they still have power to teach—
The obscure cry of toiling, suffering Man.



CHAPTER I

‘ DROP it, yer white-faced monkey, or I’ll give yer something to snivel for.’

Some one was saying it in a fierce screeching voice, as James Pontin’s heavy foot creaked on the last step of the staircase ; the crazy staircase of a London lodging-house, fetid-smelling and pitch dark, except where a streak of gray light fell across it through an open doorway. In the room beyond half-a-dozen dingy-coloured children were crawling like vermin, distinguishable only by their movement from the dingy floor, and a broken-nosed woman sat at a table rocking herself over an empty glass. James was a solid bumpkin, but a curious sensation of moral and physical sickness came over him as he glanced in at the party, and then creaked on up, up the black well of the staircase. To think that a

brother of his, a respectable Pontin, had crept into such a hole to die ! ‘ This is what comes of stiffnecked ways and wanting to live different from your father and grandfather before you, that were better men than you by a long chalk.’ Pride of race is not so exclusively confined to the gentry as is sometimes believed, and there was a dull sense of outraged family dignity about the scion of all the respectable Pontins as he knocked at his dead brother’s door. For a moment he heard, or seemed to hear, the harsh voice yelling fierce words, and to see through the gaping chinks of the door-hinges a woman in black threateningly waving a toasting-fork ; but the rustic mind is not a plate prepared for instantaneous photography, and before the impression had time to fix itself it was effaced, for he stood in the room. It was a dark room with a large dirty bed in one corner and a table in the middle, covered with a greasy remnant of linen and some odds and ends of unwashed crockery. It also contained a broken-down chest of drawers and three chairs ; nothing besides, except the

trestles the coffin had rested upon. The woman in black still stood by the table, but the toasting-fork was on the floor ; and she held herself up stiff and straight, very conscious of her weeds, whose depth would not have disgraced a duchess, if their colour suggested the slop-shop round the corner. She was a tall handsome woman, but she had broken teeth, which made her smile look ugly to the most superficial observer. Indeed she was not much accustomed to disguising her real character ; and if the lachrymose whine in which she offered her brother-in-law a seat was different from the shrill scream he had heard outside, it was not a whit pleasanter. However, this was of no consequence, for had she been the most consummate actress in the world her art would have been thrown away on brother James. He had known for years that George's Selina was a bad 'un, and when he once knew a thing he knew it ; he was not one to go chopping and changing his opinion about folks just according as they might choose to behave. But when there is a death in the family an unusual mutual

politeness is expected of its members, and under any circumstances Mr. Pontin had a sort of dignity of his own, not traceable either to intelligence or refinement. So having seated himself, he exchanged the due salutations.

‘I hope you find yourself pretty tolerable, Mrs. George.’

‘As tolerable as can be expected, thank you kindly, Mr. Pontin. And how are you?’

Then followed Brother James’s regrets at having missed the funeral; which were no polite half-truths, but the expression of genuine feelings, not to say reproaches.

‘If I’d ha’ known a day sooner I’d ha’ come, cost what cost might. Why, I got up at three o’clock in the morning last Tuesday was a year to ’ttend Cousin Gale’s burying at Watlington. I’d never ha’ believed one of my own brothers would be buried and me not there.’

‘It was the medical orficer as did it,’ said Mrs. George, sulkily apologetic. ‘He said as the corpse didn’t ought to stay in the room along with us.’ Then after a pause of con-

temptuous mental contemplation, she continued: 'He made a poor corpse, did George; but I buried him handsome all the same, with his insurance money. Nobody can't say as I've not done things respectable, though he wasn't the husband he might have been, Mr. Pontin; Lord forgive him, he wasn't—which it's gospel truth, miss; so don't you give me none of your impudence.'

The last words were addressed energetically to the ragged bed-curtain, from whose folds Selina's disparaging remarks upon her late spouse had momentarily evoked a small white face, looking flat contradiction.

'Is that Annie?' asked James, with a touch of interest.

Annie had always been one of those children who have an instinctive dislike to offering even sympathetic witnesses the spectacle of their tears. Having had time to wipe her eyes and compose her features behind the bed-curtains, she now stood up very straight, and answered, 'Yes, uncle,' in a quiet, civil voice. She was really fifteen, but she looked very small and childish in the

second-hand black frock she filled so inadequately, and she had kept those large liquid eyes, blue even to the whites, which are so common and usually so fleeting a beauty among the children of the Southern Midlands. Her hair, too, was bright and soft like a child's. James Pontin looked at her a few seconds in silence. Then he said—

‘Her father told me as she favoured our family. You’ve got a look of your Aunt Susan, my dear—her as went off in a decline twelve year last Michaelmas.’

‘I shouldn’t wonder if Annie was to go into a decline one o’ these days,’ remarked Selina, impartially surveying her offspring; ‘she do favour her father. Now there was Ethel, she took after me—a fine big girl she was. If it hadn’t been along of the scarlatina I could ha’ reared Ethel; but the others, they were born for the churchyard, as you may say.’

Meantime her brother-in-law was slowly working a bundle of soiled letters and several worn flat leather cases out of his breast-pocket.

‘You know as poor George wrote to me to come and fetch Annie?’ he asked.

Selina did not know it. Like many a man who has something more valuable to dispose of than a little daughter, he had waited till he himself was safe inside the fortress of the grave before giving the signal for that battle which too often rages round testamentary dispositions.

But Selina was not altogether inclined to fight. She stood silent for a few minutes, with her eyes on the floor, rapidly reviewing the position. For all she knew her brother-in-law might have a legal claim upon Annie, in which case it was best to make a virtue of necessity. At any rate, was it worth her while to keep the girl? No. If she had favoured Selina it would have been different; but there was an innate respectability about Annie which made her an irksome companion to her mother, and likely to be more plague than profit in the career which the latter had sketched out for herself. Yet it would be foolish to display too much alacrity in getting rid of her daughter, and so lose the chance

of a little money down as the price of that maternal sacrifice.

‘Well, to be sure,’ she whimpered, making a pad of a dirty handkerchief, to receive the expected tears ; ‘if it ain’t hard on a poor widow to have her only girl taken away from her, just as she’s getting of an age to be useful.’

‘It’s for her good, Mrs. George ; you know as it is.’

‘My only child to be taken away from me, and me left without a soul to speak to, and she such a one for her needle ! Why times and times she’ve earned eighteenpence a day mending socks and gentlemen’s under-linen.’

This statement was inaccurate, and there was a short thrust and parry of looks between child and mother.

James Pontin had carefully opened two dog-eared letters and laid them on the table before his sister-in-law ; but her eyes ran over them to fix on the smaller crisper bit of paper he was slowly flattening out on the table. His fingers lingered regretfully upon it ; it

was a serious business in these hard times to part with five pounds ; but the Pontins had always done the handsome thing by each other, and having once paid a sum down, he meant to have done with Selina.

‘It’s all for her good,’ he repeated slowly. ‘And look’ee, Mrs. George, you’re welcome to this here fi’-pun note—I’ll be bound it’ll cover twice over any loss there’ll be to you in the matter. But mind you, you won’t get no more, not till kingdom come.’ The words were scarcely out of his mouth before the note was in Selina’s hand and her handkerchief in her pocket.

‘I dessay it will be all for her good, as you was saying, Mr. Pontin,’ she said briskly. ‘You’ll call for her pretty early to-morrow, I expect.’

‘You don’t suppose as I’m a-going to sleep the night in Lon’on,’ he rejoined, with an emphasis that was almost indignation. ‘Why, I’m pretty nigh choked with the place already—besides, Lord knows what live creatures I might be taking back into aunt’s feather beds. No—since parting’s to be, you may as well

part with her to-day as to-morrow. I reckon it won't take Annie long to put her bits of things together; and if so be the train's running, we'll get back home afore dark.'

'You hear that, Annie? You look sharp, now,' said the bereaved mother, tightening the loose elastic of an old purse over the five-pound note.'

Annie, who had all this while been silent, leaning against the bed, rose with a dazed look, and opening a drawer, began to turn over a small shabby heap of clothes. Her mother put a sheet of brown paper on the ground, by way of a travelling trunk, and bustled round.

'What in the name o' wonder's that rubbish you're taking?' she asked contemptuously, after a bit. 'Things as belonged to father,' Annie answered shortly. There was a dogged set about the corners of her soft child mouth which Selina knew. Generally speaking it would not have deterred her from a quarrel to know that nothing was to be gained by it, but just now the money in her pocket gave her a comfortable feeling that

was almost good-nature, and she allowed the matter to pass.

It certainly did not take Annie long to put up her bits of things. The large bulging brown-paper parcel, whose outline is painfully familiar to the frequenter of third-class compartments, was in her uncle's hand, and she stood there in her black hat trimmed with rusty crape and her thin pseudo-fashionable cape, ready for the parting embrace.

'Good-bye, Annie,' said Selina, pecking her on the cheek. 'And mind you be a better girl to your uncle than you've been to me.'

'I'm sorry if I've been a bad girl to you, mother, and I hope as you'll forgive me,' answered the child in a set mechanical tone, and followed her uncle, still with the dazed look in her eyes. But suddenly, when they had reached the door, she turned as though some one had called her, and stood still, with an intent stare fixed upon the bed. James Pontin also stood still, surprised, his hand on the lock. He was just going to touch her on the shoulder, when with a rush and a

bound she was at the other side of the room, lying face downwards on the bed, and sobbing with deep convulsive sobs.

‘O father, father!’ she moaned, ‘father!’.

Her uncle turned back and stood by the bedside.

‘Come, come, my girl,’ he said kindly, ‘don’t ye take on so. It’s all for the best.’

‘Of course it’s all for the best,’ echoed the mother impatiently, feeling in her pocket. ‘Visitor come and told her and her father times out of mind as it’s right down silly to be allays striving against the Lord’s will. But there—it ain’t no use. Annie’s a rum ‘un.’

The sobs ceased as suddenly as they had begun, and the girl got up.

‘It was only o’ Sunday,’ she said to the opposite wall.

She meant it was only on Sunday that her father’s wasted figure had been propped on those pillows.

‘I’m sorry to leave you, Annie dear,’ he had whispered painfully, with his poor ghost of a voice. It seemed years ago, yet every

now and then she expected to see the familiar haggard face lying there, with the only eyes in the world that spoke of love to her.

‘Why, there, silly! It wasn’t o’ Sunday, it was o’ Monday,’ sniffed Selina, fancying the child spoke of her father’s death.

‘Good-bye, mother,’ said Annie again, and the door closed on her and her uncle. The farmer’s heavy step went blundering down the dark staircase, and Selina, taking a black bottle from under the bed, sat down to the ecstatic contemplation of her small capital.

On the borders of Oxfordshire there is a long straight ridge of hill, running north and south. At one end it lifts itself higher, like a breaking wave, before it drops down into the wide valley beneath. Here perches the village of High Cross, suggesting somehow, in the midst of utter unlikeness, reminiscences of a fortress town, crowning with battlement and tower some rocky height in Italy. For, as round the hoary walls of the mediæval stronghold, so too round the cottages and stackyards of the peaceful village, there

runs the glory of a great view. An irregular row of tiled roofs, a corner of grass-grown churchyard, with its low stone boundary and immemorial yew, a slope of field, golden with buttercups or ripening corn—all the picturesque commonplaces of rural England, thrown against the intense blues, the dim waving lines of that shadow-swept distance, take an unwonted decision of outline and a poetry not their own. There have been episodes too in the history of the hill village which recall the stormy past of the hill town. On the steep edge of the southern slope stands an Elizabethan hall, now a farmhouse ; but its high terrace, and the moat-like fish-ponds below, its entrance with the yew hedges and stately gateway, remain unchanged. On the north, where the road dips down to the long straight back of the ridge, run walls of mellow stone which once enclosed another old manor ; but some profane or stupid inheritor of ancient grandeur has levelled it to the ground, and there remains little beside the piers of the gate and a high octagonal summer-house, placed like a watch-tower at the northern

corner. These sturdy walled places flanking the village marked it out as a retreat for the broken remnant of a Royalist army in the Parliamentary wars ; and the steep fields of grass and corn, and the narrow gray bridge over the stream below, have felt the iron thud of cannon-balls, and drunk their share of human blood. At the end of the village street, a little before you reach the Manor, as the site of the demolished house is still called, stands Pontin's farm ; a low gabled building some two hundred and odd years old. A Pontin built it, and Pontins have lived in it ever since ; but they have shared the fate of other yeomen farmers, and pay rent now to the remote and graceless destroyer of the old Manor. A strip of garden separates it from the road, and just opposite stand three or four great elm-trees, shading a broken stone cross. On the farther side the ground drops suddenly ; beyond the battered shaft of the cross, high on its uneven steps, stretches the wide distance, with, on sunny days, the far-off city's cluster of turrets, rising pale gray from the dim blue waves of

wooded country. It was in the shadow of these elms that Annie Pontin alighted, after a long slow drive through lanes and fields, whose utter silence startled and almost bewildered the cockney child. In honour of the occasion her uncle drew up at the garden wicket instead of driving into the farmyard, from which an overgrown boy, plain and dull of countenance, came out to take the cart. Mr. Pontin addressed a few questions to the lad in his grave severe voice, discontented beforehand with the slow and stammering answers. Meantime an idiot child with a large head came slowly down the steps of the cross, moping and mowing at the newcomer.

‘He’s the stoopidest lad as ever I kept, is Jess,’ muttered the farmer to himself as he threw the reins to the boy, and led the way up the flagged path to the door. It stood open, and they went on through some low stone passages. ‘Aunt! aunt! Where are you got to?’ he shouted.

‘Lor, uncle,’ returned an invisible some one, evidently more surprised than pleased, ‘you don’t mean to say as that’s you come back

a'ready? And me only jest washed up the tea-things, and not expecting you till supper!

'There ain't no accounting for them trains,' Mr. Pontin apologised. 'This 'un come back such a deal quicker nor it went.'

They had reached the threshold of a low square room, with a brick floor and a window overgrown with greenery. A shelf ran round three sides of it, on which stood pans full of milk and cream, dishes of butter and little piles of eggs, shading through all tones, from a pearly transparent white to a warm reddish brown. Mrs. Pontin was counting the eggs into a market basket, for it was Friday evening. She was a rather short and very broad woman, with long arms and a round red face. She wore a purplish print dress and an old black straw hat with a purple ribbon round it.

'This is Annie,' said James, with his hand on the girl's shoulder.

Mrs. Pontin came forward, wiping her thick wet fingers on her apron, and looking hard at Annie.

'You're kindly welcome, my dear,' she said,

'and I hope you'll be a good girl to them as is good to you. Plenty of work and plenty of victuals—that's what you'll find here. We must all on us work for our living. I'm sure I works hard enough for mine—I do' know whatever uncle would do without me.'

Then she looked hard at Annie again. She had seen Selina once, and had expected her daughter to be different from that ; worse in some ways, and better in others. The Annie of her imagination had worn a locket and some feathers, had a fine colour, a facile smile, and a rolling black eye ; in short, every outward sign of tendencies which Mrs. James understood so little she imagined herself equal to suppressing them. A tall robust frame and long arms, with immense latent capacities for scouring and bucket-carrying, were the compensating qualities of the imaginary Annie. The real one was small and pale, with a grave shy look ; plainly the daughter of that George whose corpse had reflected so little credit on his family.

'I suppose as you've got Ben's room ready?' asked Mr. Pontin.

‘I suppose as I ain’t done nothing of the sort,’ retorted his wife sharply ; and, leaning over the market basket, she went on counting the eggs for a few minutes. Then she turned round and resumed the subject. ‘Ben’s room!—a likely thing, indeed ! Why, what ’ud we do if Benny was to come back, and him so partic’lar about his ornaments?—You come along o’ me, Annie, my girl, and never mind uncle.’

There was something startling in hearing her dignified uncle thus summarily disposed of, but Annie followed Mrs. Pontin up two short steep flights of stairs, till they reached a small attic room with sloping walls.

‘You’ll find it uncommon comfortable after Lon’on, I dessay,’ said aunt kindly. ‘It was the girl’s room when we kep’ one—but lor ! them girls I arlways say is a deal more plague than profit. I’d a sight sooner do a thing straight off myself than have to be undoin’ it and doin’ it again after them.’

It was true that aunt ‘arlways said’ this when the subject of ‘girls’ came up ; it was one of the limited stock of remarks that

formed her conversational *répertoire*. But this did not prevent its being discouraging to the new 'girl,' who said timidly, turning very pink :

'I'm afraid you'll find me a lot of trouble, aunt.'

'Never you mind me, my dear,' replied Mrs. Pontin cheerfully. 'I'm that used to trouble I don't know what I should do without it. Work, work, work, from morning till night—that's my motto. Uncle says he never see such a woman.'

She hung a towel over the solitary chair, and lumbered off to fetch a bit of soap.

The linen on the bed was old but fine, and marked J. P. in the corner with elaborate flourishes in red cotton. When Annie, wearied out with the experiences of the day, crept between the cool sheets, she noticed how sweet they smelt. Truth to tell, Mrs. Pontin's own capacious nostrils recked little of savours, good or evil ; but it was one of the traditional observances of the house to cut the lavender every year from the bushes on each side of the door and lay it in the

linen-presses, between the sheets. The odour lingered among them like a vain silent prayer to be remembered, breathing from those whose hands had long ago stored up and tended the delicate linen, whose bodies had lain warm in it, and now were mouldering under the long grass in the neglected churchyard.

CHAPTER II

A PERSON of great natural respectability who has once been guilty of an indiscretion will never allow the fact to be forgotten. Crudely or by implication, according to their social and intellectual status, will they be eternally justifying their particular motives and general character, before a world which scarcely remembers to impugn them. Mrs. Pontin had once committed a breach of certain conventionalities which are at least as punctually observed in her class as in a higher one. She had married James Pontin within a few months of her first husband's death. Annie, like the rest of aunt's acquaintances, was destined to hear often and in much detail the history of the circumstances which had led to this breach of etiquette; indeed it was difficult to imagine how Mrs. Pontin's conversation

got on before it had found this central point upon which to revolve.

It was on the first morning after Annie's arrival that she was initiated. She was 'going over' the stone floor of the back kitchen with a wet cloth and weak little hands, while her aunt's stumpy but agile fingers were peeling potatoes.

'Did you ever see your Aunt Susan?' asked Mrs. Pontin.

'No,' answered Annie, 'but I've heard tell of her. Father used to say I was like her. She went off in a decline, didn't she?'

'Yes; she was Benny's mother, and I always was that fond of Benny. If it hadn't been along of him and my hundred pounds, as I couldn't get back, I don't know as I should ever ha' married Pontin.'

Aunt, if a severe, was not an ill-natured wife, but she was always anxious to clear herself from the imputation of having been moved to her second marriage by any personal partiality for the bridegroom. It must be recognised that she had acted throughout under the pressure of stern necessity.

‘Your Aunt Susan, she kep’ house for uncle ; and however he did for all the live creatures and Benny and hisself them months after she was buried, Lord only knows. I believe he’ve gone so far as to say it was a real blessin’ my poor Kite died Easter followin’—which it ain’t right nor kind of him.’

Aunt’s free comments on her husband did not shock Annie so greatly as they might one of us, who are accustomed to insinuate more delicately than Mrs. Pontin the numerous failings and general inferiority of our spouses. Yet she felt vaguely chilled as she put in the proper monosyllables at the different points in her aunt’s discourse.

‘Kite, he was gardener down at the Hall—that was afore it was let to Mr. Shepherd—and I was dairywoman there more nor twenty year. We’d saved atween us a matter of a hunderd pounds, and then what must he be after but lending it to James Pontin, and never a bit of paper passed. Lor, poor man, it was on his mind when he come to die! Did your father die hard, Annie?’

‘I don’t know,’ answered Annie, getting

white ; ' I was asleep, and mother didn't have me woke.'

' Kite, he died very hard. He took a chill and went off sudden—a strong hearty man, too, he was. He'd been in a kind o' agony most o' the day, moaning and crying out badly ; then when it began to get dark he lay still a bit, and I thought I heard him rattle. " He's gone, poor soul," thinks I, and I goes to open the window, when all on a sudden—" Jane !" he says, in a voice fit to startle you. I jumped round in a flurry, as you may think, and there were his eyes wide open. " Jane," he says again, but weaker, and still staring at me, till his eyes were a'most coming out of his head. " Thomas," says I, solemn-like—for I mostly called him Tom—" if there's anything on your mind, don't you go to the grave with it." Then he kind o' pulled me, to get my head down to his mouth ; and he says slowly, in a rattling sort of whisper, " Pontin—Pontin, you get my hunderd pounds, get my hunderd pounds—my hunderd"—and with that he stopped sudden, stretched hisself out, and died, with the words, as you

may say, between his lips. Ay, he was a careful man, was Kite, that he was!’

And Mrs. Pontin heaved a sigh over the husband of her youth, as she began mixing the potato-peelings with meal, for a lady pig in a delicate state of health.

‘There, now—whatever was I to do?’ she began again, argumentatively, ‘having no paper, and me a lone woman, and all on us turned out at the Hall, on account of Mr. Shepherd taking it. I don’t want to say as uncle would ha’ robbed me, but he swore and declared as he couldn’t pay me then—and me a lone woman. “You’d a deal better marry me right off, Mrs. Kite,” says Pontin. “There’s all the things waiting and spoiling, for the matter of that. And whatever to do with Benny since his mammer died, I don’t know.” So what with one thing and another, and my husband having died with uncle’s name, as you may say, on his lips, why I married him twelve year come the fifth of July. And he’ve been a kind husband to me, have Pontin; but there! he ain’t like Kite.’

Then followed the whole sad story of naughty Benny. The boy had shared Mrs. Pontin's affections with the young pigs and turkeys and ducklings, whom having nourished with maternal devotion during their infancy she despatched to the Oxford poulterers without a pang, when they had come to the period of succulence, if not of discretion. She loved the human creature in proportion as it approached the animal. With grown persons her patience was remarkably limited ; but children might chase her pigs, frighten her brood-hens and make mud-pies on her kitchen floor, and get no further remonstrance than 'Pretty dears ! They be always at something ;' or 'There now, what a heat you be getting in !' Had Benny been a girl, it is likely that aunt's indulgence for him would have come to an earlier and more absolute end than it did. As it was, her affection for him really remained, though as he grew up she became angry and sharp-tongued over the spoilt idle ways she had encouraged in their beginning. There had been stormy scenes between the boy and his adopted

parents ; and at last, about a year before Annie's arrival, he had run away from home and had never sent them a line since.

‘And him as could write so beautiful !
Oh, it was right down cruel of him !’

Benny was gone, but his story was not without its influence on Annie's position. It had embittered James Pontin, hardened his heart, and given him a vague sense of antagonism to young folks and their ways. In aunt's eyes Annie must always have had great disadvantages, not being a boy, and having passed the age of legitimate helplessness, without being stalwart and helpful. Still she too might have been more interested in the child, had it not been for the haunting shade of the absent Benny. If Annie herself had been fearless and demonstrative, with the ready smiles and innocent impertinences that are learned in a happy home, she might have stormed the gates of these two narrow and preoccupied hearts. But, like many people with an almost morbid craving for affection, she was slow to express and slower to claim it. This was partly the fault of her Saxon

blood, and partly of the fifteen years spent under the violent tyranny of Selina. Her father too had been an undemonstrative man, but she had quite understood how much he loved her. She had been to him not only a daughter, but a living reminder of his favourite sister, and a proof which he seemed to want that all his life had not been spent in city streets and workshops; that he had really once been a healthy country boy, playing about the steep fields and crouching in the wide chimney corner of the farm at High Cross, with the other well-washed and well-whipped Pontin children. His affection had perhaps encouraged the sensitiveness of her character too much for her future happiness; but some children are born with a conscious delight in love which comes to others either with years or not at all. So all the material advantages of High Cross did not make up to her for the tenderness and sympathy she had known and knew no more.

She found herself as much despised by her aunt as she had been by her mother, if from a different point of view; for she had

learnt little in London that was of service to her in the country, and in short was not the stuff out of which a good farm help is made. She was intelligent, certainly, and grew physically stronger in that fine bracing air; but if there was any improvement in her, it was not Mrs. Pontin who would acknowledge it. She had early proclaimed that Annie had 'no more strength nor a mouse,' and was 'that awkward' at her work she 'couldn't abear to see her'; and her opinion once given, she was not one to go back upon it. It is true that the girl had accomplishments of her own. Selina had once been a cook, and in her flashes of domesticity she had found Annie a ready learner. But the Pontins' Sunday dinner—a lump of half-raw meat, some partially boiled potatoes, and a greasy suet pudding—seemed to them already an ideal repast not admitting of improvement. She was also a first-rate needlewoman, and had considerable taste. But aunt appreciated nothing in needlework beyond strong stitches, and was not half sure that she liked the air of smartness Annie's little fingers contrived

to give even to a black lace cap with purple ribbons. She had all her life been providentially sustained in the most severe principles about ribbons and other personal adornments, by her uncompromising ugliness. Probably causes of the same kind, besides her continual occupiedness, strengthened her in the belief of the old-fashioned poor, that respectable persons keep 'themselves to themselves.' She had a few old cousins and other cronies of her own standing in the village, but she numbered no family of young people among her intimates. The hill folk are a rough lot, far from Arcadian in their words or ways, and full of a suspicious wonder at strangers; and Annie felt the want of companions, when she had time to think about it. Presently she begun to make herself companions of inanimate things, that suggested fancies about the dead people who had been young in the house before her. On the panelled walls of the parlour hung two samplers, beautifully worked in silks. One had a red geometrical house and two equally geometrical ladies under it, and was signed, in blue—*Anne Turrill, 1810.*

The other had some moral verses, three sprays of flowers, and the signature *Susan Pontin*, 1832, in red. All over the house there was patchwork and embroidery that had been worked by these two, her grandmother and her aunt. There was a black profile of the one and a daguerrotype of the other over the parlour chimney-piece, and Annie used to fancy they were like her father; though in fact they had never had the faintest resemblance to anybody. It was of no use to ask either Mr. or Mrs. Pontin about poor Susan; it led to little except a comparison of her management of the pigs and poultry with aunt's, very much to the advantage of the latter. James had been fond of his sister, but he had forgotten it, and was never tired of congratulating himself on his acuteness in having secured the services of the ex-Mrs. Kite.

‘There’s a smart deal of the rent comes out of the poultry-yard nowadays,’ he would say to her in moments of unusual confidence — ‘I don’t know whatever I should do if you was took.’

‘I do hope as the Lord will spare me,’ Mrs. Pontin would respond fervently. ‘It’s a sin to think of the money you’d be spending on girls and things as don’t know a hen’s egg from a galeeny’s. It ain’t Annie as would be a help to her uncle,’ she would add, by way of applying a wholesome stimulus to her niece, if she happened to be in the room.

One evening when aunt was tenderly soothing the death-bed of a young chicken, and Annie and Mr. Pontin were consequently alone in the kitchen, she began timidly :

‘It’s a long time, isn’t it, uncle, since grandmother died?’

Mr. Pontin put down the *Oxford Guardian* and rubbed his forehead.

‘Nigh upon eight-and-thirty year,’ he answered slowly.

‘Was she like that black thing in the parlour?’ asked Annie.

Mr. Pontin deliberated. ‘I do’ know as she was,’ he said. Then, after a pause: ‘She was a furinner in these parts, my mother was ; come from Millwater’—a village some five miles away.

‘Was she like Aunt Susan?’ Annie persisted.

Mr. Pontin deliberated again. ‘I do’ know as she was. Leastways, I don’t seem to recollect rightly.’

‘She must have been a rare good worker,’ said the girl. ‘It’s pretty, that quilt she done in the best bedroom.’

‘She was a very respectable woman was my mother, uncommon respectable,’ uncle affirmed impressively; ‘and a nice-looking woman too, I believe.’ He paused once more. ‘I’ve heard the gentlemen in Oxford thought a deal of her cream-cheeses.’

This was all the family history or sentiment that was to be extracted from James, and after a while Annie left off thinking much about the deceased Pontins; partly because it was unsatisfactory, and partly because she found a living person, not far from her own age, to think about.

It was towards the end of June, when the hay was mostly carried, but Mr. Pontin had got behind with the upper meadow, and the hand of the weather-glass was going round to *Change*.

‘No one won’t be back from the hay-making this long while,’ said Mrs. Pontin, as the shadows of the great walnut trees stretched themselves across the orchard. ‘You must go and bring the cows back from the Manor field, Annie.’

Poor Annie! She had only been some few months at the farm, and horned beasts were still very terrible to her. But to state her objections to them would have been both humiliating and useless, so she put on her sun-bonnet and went out through the orchard. Mr. Pontin rented the ground on which the Manor had stood, and which was only separated by a lane from the farm land. The gateway opening on the lane had once been filled with fine ironwork, but now a common wooden field gate leaned between the square stone piers. This broken-down gate and the dirty cattle-track it crossed seemed like a coarse satire on the two battered but dignified stone monsters which flanked it, each on his secular perch; each looking out over the country below with an air of haughty dominion, unconscious that the shield he

superintended had been removed, and that he had absolutely nothing behind him. Ridiculous yet venerable creatures! They had much in common with the small country aristocracy to whom they owed their existence.

The kitchen-garden of the Manor still remained, in the corner of the field next the summer-house. This summer-house was a picturesque building, with its eight sides, its high tiled roof gilded over with lichen, its carved doorway, and little mullioned windows. A tall Scotch fir with a red stem overleaned it, splashing its mellow walls and roof with shadows. The landlord's agent let it as a cottage, but at present only the upper room was occupied—the tenant being Jesse Williams, the Pontins' ex-ploughboy, now working at the Hall farm. All Mr. Shepherd's hay was up, and Jesse, who had come home soon after five, was comfortably consuming some brownish hot water and a piece of alummy bread, when he saw Annie come into the field—a small black figure in a white sun-bonnet. The cows were feeding together, and she skirted them cautiously. 'Co' up,

Violet! Co' up, Diamond!' But the cool of the evening had given them an appetite, and the crunching sound continued unabated. It seems a simple matter to drive three cows and a heifer out of a field ; but if they choose to turn a deaf ear to your most pointed remarks and you are a small and unarmed person, with a somewhat exaggerated respect for their horns, how are you to do it? It would be difficult to think of a better plan than Annie's, although it had not the merit of success. She stood behind them, shaking her skirts with immense energy, and ejaculating 'Shuh! Shuh!' It was enough to terrify the boldest duckling that ever floundered in a meal-pan ; but cows are of a more phlegmatic disposition, and it was some minutes before they even looked round. Then first the heifer turned right-about-face to stare at this minute animated whirlwind, and one by one the three cows followed her example. There seemed a world of unpleasant meaning in their large eyes under their large horns, and in the long breaths they puffed out of their great pink nostrils, as they advanced

slowly upon her, step by step. For some minutes she kept retreating gradually backwards, while her courage, being of about the same consistency as Bob Acres', went on oozing out at the ends of her fingers. At last she fairly turned tail, and ran as fast as her legs could carry her to a thick clump of alder-bushes, higher up the field. Just as she reached it the lank figure of Jesse appeared from the other side. She stopped running abruptly, and walked up to the alders, with a rather exaggerated air of dignified deliberation.

'Good evening, Jess. I was coming to get a stick,' she said; 'the cows won't do as I bid 'em without.'

Jess grinned.

'J-jest you wait a bit and let m-me cut it,' he said in his stammering way. Then, as he was hacking at the juicy stem of the alder with a blunt horn-handled knife—'There ain't no sense in being afeard of cows,' he remarked, in a tone whose kindliness effaced any roughness there might appear to be in the words.

‘I’ve never been used to animals,’ Annie admitted, ‘and it makes me timid-like, being left alone with ’em. They do stare so—seems as though they ought to speak.’

‘You’d best let me drive ’em back for you,’ he said, making a switch of the green branch. ‘They knows me, poor beasts.’

Annie jumped at the offer. The cows, being conservative animals, no sooner heard the familiar voice of the ploughboy than they resignedly turned their faces to the gate and begun to plod homewards; not after the ill-regulated manner of horses, who whisk their tails and hurry the pace, or stop and snatch a wanton mouthful by the way, but slowly and steadily, with unturned heads and an entire acceptance of the inevitable.

‘Folks talks a deal of nonsense about cows,’ Jess observed, as he and Annie followed them through the gate. ‘And about bulls too, for the matter o’ that.’

‘Oh, I couldn’t abide a bull! They’re dreadful dangerous,’ she cried.

Jess smiled down on her with some superiority.

‘Why there’s our old bull at the Hall, you might pull his tail off pretty nigh and you wouldn’t get no harm, he’ve got such a beautiful temper’—and the switch came down smartly on the heifer’s back.

‘I ain’t going to try, though ; and I don’t suppose as you will either, Master Jess,’ returned she, with a touch of town flippancy and a giggle.

Jess giggled too and walked on in silence, musing a repartee. None, however, occurring to him, he laughed again. This was all the conversation that took place between them till they reached the cow-shed, yet their acquaintance with each other seemed to have progressed further in the few minutes’ walk behind the cows than in all the mornings they had breakfasted together in the farm kitchen. There had always been a certain silent sympathy between them. They were both ‘furinners in High Cross’—an important factor in life there—and while Jess was being grumbled at in the yard, Annie was being upbraided among the poultry-coops or in the dairy. Moreover, if Mr. or Mrs. Pontin

wished to give an example of the degeneracy of the young men or maidens of to-day, Jess and Annie served as such alternately. Like many of the best workers, intellectual as well as practical, Mrs. Pontin wanted either the patience or the power to train others, and Uncle James was also an impatient teacher ; so that the boy and girl had often smarted together under a sense of injustice, as well as harshness.

Not being used to consideration, Annie perhaps exaggerated the amount of gratitude due to Jess for his timely assistance with the cows. She stood at the door of the stable, and did not find any words in which to thank him.

‘I wish as you’d let me do something for you,’ she said at last, timidly touching his sleeve as he went out. ‘There’s such a hole in your coat here, just at the elbow ; it’s all scraped up, ever so far. It would make a beautiful darn.’

‘Oh, never you mind,’ responded Jess, brusque and awkward. ‘There’s Betsy Todd mends me o’ Saturdays, when I spares the money.’

But Annie was not to be denied.

‘You’d best let me do it,’ she said decisively. ‘She’d boggle it dreadful, old Betsy would. You just hang it up here, and to-morrow when I come to the garden I’ll put it inside your window.’

And as Annie really wished and intended to do it, and Jesse had no cause for denying her except violent bashfulness, he ended by divesting himself of his coat, with that hang-dog and sullen expression of countenance which indicates pleasing embarrassment in the breast of the British swain.

This was the beginning of a friendship between the young people which, without having in it much of sentiment, soon filled a considerable space in both their lives, for the simple reason that each was to the other the only friend. In the long summer evenings, when Annie was picking the fruit for market, or tending the few flowers that still straggled about among the vegetables in the old Manor garden, Jess was never far off. Sometimes they would pick raspberries or currants silently together, side by side, till the chill

dew rose and their faces looked white in the gathering darkness. Sometimes they would sit on the walled edge of the garden, where it dropped into the meadow, while Annie did a bit of mending for Jess by the last red light of the evening. Aunt had no objection to Jesse's lending a hand in the garden; whether she would equally have approved of the half-hours spent by Annie in putting him straight is doubtful. Yet they were but the just recompense of his labours. Had Jesse had the sole direction of these interviews, they would have more exactly resembled those which may be witnessed Sunday after Sunday in any country lane; where the square couples, with shining red faces, pass one after the other, arm-in-arm, or even locked in more tender embrace, but always absolutely silent, and as a rule stolidly staring in opposite directions. The peasant is inarticulate in his loves, like the trees and plants and the many scarcely more conscious things with which he shares—alas! so unequally—the bounty and the beauty of the great Mother. Not only in his loves, but

also in his intimacies ; for Jess was not yet Annie's lover ; his attachment to her was chiefly the clinging of one lonely human creature to another, though there was in it a grain of romance, arising from the consciousness that he was not her equal. Though treated as a farm servant, Mr. Pontin's niece was socially above the former workhouse boy and actual carter, besides being really his superior in manners and intelligence.

Annie herself had enough of the rustic in her blood to be silent enough at times. At the farm she was 'uncommon quiet,' as uncle said ; but she had the finer, more excitable nervous organisation of a woman, and a town-bred one, and felt every now and then the imperious need to express herself, to ask and receive definite spoken sympathy. Among the currant-bushes, or sitting on the edge of the wall, she told Jess all about her old life in London—the busy streets, her friends at the Board schools and the Sunday outings to Battersea, or even as far as Putney ; about the little brothers and sisters she had been 'that fond of,' and who had all died ; and

most about her father. The home over which Selina presided had not been a happy one ; but while poor George had been able to work it had not been poverty-stricken, and life there had had its bright moments. After all, it was a home. Jesse had nothing to look back to but ten gray years in the work-house school ; and before that, dim memories of a barge cabin, in which he had sometimes been locked up all day, and of a drunken bargee father, who had not loved him at all, but, on the contrary, considerably maltreated him. He had often felt lonely, without knowing exactly what it was that he felt. Annie's talk, her little cares for him, and the bright smile she gave him when they met, made him conscious that there had been a blank in his life before he had known her. He was plain and coarse-looking enough, following the plough in his dirty corduroys ; worse still on Sundays and holidays, with red neck glowing above his turn-down collar and shiny coat, and low pot-hat surmounting his cropped colourless poll. Yet his great capacity for affection and need of it gave

him a certain refinement of feeling, and made him a more entirely innocent companion for her than most of the eligible youths of High Cross would have been, since the phlegm of the rustic does not, unfortunately, preserve him from an early acquaintance with the grosser vices.

While the summer lasted they met nearly every day, but when winter came it was different. Jesse had to hang about in the dusk, on the chance of seeing her at the shop, or coming home from Horseley, the neighbouring village, where there was a railway station and a chemist. He became a regular attendant at church; for if Annie was not there in the morning, he went in the afternoon too. Mrs. Pontin was not much of a church-goer; she 'hadn't the time for them kind o' things,' she said, without the least intention of making light of religion in general, or forms and ceremonies in particular. But it would appear from her account of the matter that on a certain momentous occasion, some ten years before, when a sow and a whole litter of young ones had come to grief while she was

at morning service, she had had a formal explanation with the Almighty, on the subject of her conflicting duties to Him and to the live creatures. He seems to have recognised at once the difficulties of her position ; at least she always affirmed, with a calm confidence for which she must have had grounds, that the Lord knew very well there wasn't a soul except herself as could be trusted to look after them poor dumb things, and that she couldn't be in two places at a time, no more than any one else. The result of this explanation had apparently been a plenary dispensation from the duty of attendance at church, except at such times and seasons as seemed to her good ; for instance, when the turkeys had all gone to market, and before the hens had begun sitting. For her part, she undertook to send Pontin regularly, winter and summer. Mr. Hayes, the somnolent old Vicar, had never interfered with this arrangement, though on one occasion Mrs. Hayes, who had clear notions of her duties, had remonstrated with her independent parishioner. But the plainest of those plain

words which the Vicar's wife prided herself on using could not persuade Mrs. Pontin that her conduct was not as defensible in this as in every other particular, or that there could be any misunderstanding between herself and the powers above. She was respectful but exasperatingly firm with her clergywoman, and the two parted in mutual indignation. In the summer, when there was more work to be done, she did not send Annie very regularly ; but in winter the girl was to be seen nearly every Sunday morning sitting by her uncle in the long shiny deal pew. The church was a fine old building, with a broken Norman arch opening into the chancel ; and beyond it a Jacobean altar-tomb, whereon reposed a lady in coif and ruff, with rings on her folded hands, the fingers of which were still pink in places. Religion at the farm was a matter of decorum, and in London it had never been mentioned except in mockery, so that it was not one of the realities of life to Annie. Her uncle was a little scandalised at first at her difficulty in finding her place, especially if he had to find it for her before

the congregation ; but when once she knew her way about the prayer-book, her spiritual equipment seemed to him complete. The squawking of Mrs. Hayes' harmonium, the droning of the school-children, and Mr. Hayes' bored recitations of his old sermons, were not calculated to rouse any interest ; and her mind worked more on the carven intricacies of lace and ribbon and brocade in the Jacobean lady's costume, and the chances of a talk with Jesse after service, than on the words she listened to or repeated.

Though always slight and fragile, Annie had grown taller and plumper since she came to the farm ; her blue eyes were still large and childlike, but they no longer devoured her face, and she had a faint pink colour in her cheeks. The uneducated have a greater appreciation of delicate prettiness than is conventionally supposed, and 'Pontin's niece' was not unfavourably observed by the youth of High Cross when, in the full glare of Sunday cleanliness, they lurched along the village street, or dangled their lumpish extremities from the tombstones by the church door. It

was not Annie who knew or guessed the notice she began to excite, but Jesse felt a glow of pride when he heard her described as 'not a bad-looking girl,' though a Londoner, and probably 'stuck up.' The Pontins had always been somewhat unsociable, as became their respectability; and Mrs. Pontin was unpopular, so that no young man except Jesse ever offered to walk from church with them. As he had been several years on the farm, his doing so seemed only natural.

What with the difficulty of seeing Annie, the long ruminations in church, and the oft-repeated if limited admiration of the other young men, Jesse's attachment to her had become distinctly sentimental by the end of the winter. Besides, he was past eighteen, which is quite a mature age in his class, where life begins early.

So when it was summer again, and they sat on the garden wall together, just where the rose-bush bends and breaks in a wave of pink and white and gold, over the elder below, he was more silent than before—sheepish, and even sometimes capable of attempting a

little clumsy sentimentalism, at the sound of which he blushed a great deal more than Annie, who but dimly perceived his intention.

One afternoon, when the rose-time was nearly over, she was standing on a gate to reach a few faint buds from the top of the hedge, when Jess came by with an empty cart and gathered them for her ; whereon she pinned them under her chin with her little steel brooch.

‘They be just about the same colour as your face, Annie,’ he said, and grinned a dreary grin of embarrassment.

Annie had no appropriate reply, and walked back to the clothes line, which was indeed her proper destination. She had taken down two sheets, and turned to put them in the basket, when she saw Jesse still standing at the gate.

‘Annie!’ he called urgently, ‘Annie!’

‘Well, Jess, what is it?’

‘I want to speak to you.’

She came up to the gate.

‘You won’t forget it was me as got them

roses for you?' he said. 'Just keep 'em a bit—do, Annie.'

Then he nodded, climbed on the shaft of the cart, clacked his tongue, and jolted off without waiting for an answer.

'Now you take off them fallals, Annie,' said Mrs. Pontin, who met her niece coming in with the linen-basket. 'I ain't no patience with your brooches and flowers and stuff. Just look at me, working so hard as I don't know whatever uncle 'ud do without me; you won't catch me dressing of myself that fashion.'

Annie took off the objectionable adornments, putting the roses in a little broken jug in her room. Aunt's ill-humour continued none the less. She was not a bad-hearted woman, but she would have liked Annie better if she had made her frocks worse, and had a coarser complexion and hair. Taste and refinement may be as repulsive to one nature as their opposites are to another. Selina was continually held up as a warning to her daughter, and an illustration of what might be expected of the latter. This was

especially the case since James's cousin Pether, the Oxford draper, had offered him some pink zephyr cotton at a bargain, instead of the purple print he had been commissioned to buy for Annie, and he had brought it home for her to make up. Aunt was not the only person who was affected by the frivolous and becoming colour of Annie's new frocks. Albert, the idiot child, who had been the first to greet her arrival in High Cross, noticed it. He was a boy of thirteen or fourteen, but no bigger than a child of ten. His unwieldy head rolled loosely on his shoulders, he had a blind eye—a white, viscous-looking eye—and a great shapeless mouth, that was always wet, and generally munching some unclean food. From babyhood he had been accustomed to climb about the steps of the stone cross opposite the front gate, or come through the lane into the orchard, to share with Mr. Pontin's pigs the untimely fallen fruit. The pigs seemed quite to have adopted him into their family ; and as he crouched among them on hot summer days, under the great walnut tree, with their dirty snouts exploring the

recesses of his jacket or resting on his bare legs, it was difficult to tell which of the occasional snorts and squeals which expressed the emotions of the party were human and which porcine.

‘Lor, Annie! However did you tear your apron that fashion?’ asked Mrs. Ponton in surprise one morning, when the girl came in with the eggs of a certain speckled Hamboro’, which always declined to lay in a less rural spot than the orchard hedge. Annie was a little pale, and winked back a petulant tear as she answered:

‘It’s that bothering Albert—I don’t know what’s come to him as he can’t leave me alone. He came this morning, smelling of the pigs enough to knock you down, and smearing his dirty fingers all over my clean frock. I said to him half a dozen times, “Go away, Albert!”—and it wasn’t no use: so I gave him a push, and he began to scream and halloa dreadful, more like a beast than a child; and then he just took my apron in his teeth and tore it right up.’

‘Did he, poor innocent!’ cried Mrs. Pontin

compassionately. 'Now don't you go telling nobody, Annie, or the man will be round and sending him off to Littlemore 'Sylum, like poor Tommy Buswell. I ain't no patience with their new-fangled notions, shutting up folks as is a bit silly, and folks as has scarlatina and such like. We must trust in Providence, that's what we must do.'

'I wish they would shut him up,' said Annie pettishly. 'I know I'm right down frightened of him.'

'It's cru'l of you to talk that way,' replied aunt with severity. 'Poor little fellow! I'm glad enough to have him about with the live creatures, as happy as any of 'em.'

'I dare say they treat them very kind at the 'Sylum,' Annie apologised.

'Kind!' exclaimed aunt disdainfully. 'And who's to know if they does or doesn't?—only them as can see through stone walls. No, I'll be bound it's cold comfort any of us 'ud find if we got inside of it—stale bread and straw, and chains too, very like. So just you mind, my girl, and don't go saying you're frightened of Albert, poor little

innocent, and getting him shut up in the 'Sylum.'

And as Annie did not want to do any one an ill turn, she mentioned the continual annoyance she suffered from the idiot to no one except Jesse; who indeed came in for his share of it, seeing that Albert did not scruple to intrude upon the Manor garden of an evening, whence he was sometimes ejected with a violence that would have shocked Mrs. Pontin.

It came to pass that in September Jesse's work at Mr. Shepherd's was altered, and he was unable as a rule to get home till it was nearly dark; for at that time of year the evenings draw in. This brought him face to face with the dreaded winter season, when almost daily chats with Annie must be exchanged for looks and chance words at long intervals, or what seemed long intervals. The only bright spot was that his wages were increased. This may have had something to do with an imprudent proposition which he made to Annie; but it was mainly the intolerable impatience of a youthful lover

which inspired him with the unlucky notion. This was that Annie should ask to be allowed to walk with him on Sunday afternoons.

‘Next Sunday afternoon,’ suggested Annie, with feminine prudence or clearer perception of other people’s probable sentiments.

To ‘walk’ with a young man is not of course to be engaged to him, but it is to admit him among possible *fiancés*. Jesse and Annie knew this, and they also knew that the Pontins would be very likely to think a labourer, lately a workhouse lad, beneath their niece, even as a mere pretender to her hand. They knew it, as young people know most of the rocky irresistible facts of life which they have not yet experienced, and against which, for all their knowledge, they are dashed by its equally irresistible currents.

Annie did not love Jesse as he did her, but she was fonder of him than of any living person, and the prospect of the long winter without his companionship seemed drearier than last year. So on Sunday morning, when she was washing up the breakfast-things in the kitchen, and Mrs. Pontin was not there,

and Mr. Pontin was smoking a pipe, she began boldly :

‘Uncle, have you any objection to my taking a walk with Jesse Williams this afternoon?’

‘With Jesse Williams?’ repeated uncle surprised, and trying to rub the idea into his iron-gray head with the horny hand of labour.

When it was in it did not find much favour in his sight. He had never been given to courting himself, and the experience of his brothers and sisters, and latterly of the peccant Benny, had not recommended the practice to him. He was a decided man, except when he bowed to the manifest superiority of Mrs. Pontin.

‘Look here, aunt,’ he said, as she bustled in, most inopportunistly to Annie’s thinking ; ‘here’s Annie wants to go courting with Jess Williams, our work’us boy.’

‘There, now!’ exclaimed she triumphantly; ‘didn’t I say as there was something up when I see her with her flowers and her brooches and things, quite ondecnt.’

Annie was blushing hotly, and the ready tears were in her eyes.

‘Jesse’s not courting me,’ she said, unconsciously mendacious.

Uncle laughed grimly.

‘What does he want to walk with you for, then?’ he asked.

Annie twisted her apron-string.

‘He haven’t got any one belonging to him, and he feels lonely-like. He used to come and help in the garden a bit of an evening; but now he has to stay down at the Hall, so as he can’t come, and he just wants company—and wants to see me—that’s all.’

‘Oh, that’s all, is it? And quite enough too.’ Then he turned testily to his wife: ‘What’s this about Jess in the garden, aunt? You ought to ha’ told me about it.’

‘I’d got plenty o’ things to think of without that,’ retorted Mrs. Pontin, promptly on the defensive. ‘He was making hisself useful; and who’d ha’ thought as Annie would take up with a work’us boy? I’ve no patience with them girls and their ways, sweethearting about here, there, and every-

where. That ain't the way I got Kite, nor you neither.'

Aunt, proudly conscious of having attracted two husbands by purely practical qualities, felt at liberty to disparage the lighter matters of courtship. To her had never been offered roses or even apples; and the plate-like expanse of silver locket which sometimes, but very rarely, shone upon her ample bosom had not been the gift of the frugal Kite, but of the admiring Pontin, after an unusually good sale of pigs.

'Now you'll just understand, my girl,' said uncle sternly, 'I won't have you courting about with Jess or any one else—so there's an end on't.'

And he left the room.

CHAPTER III

THE next morning Uncle James drove off to Watlington ; he had business in the neighbourhood, and was to stay the night there with his cousins. This was an unusual event, and there had been much washing and brushing of clothes in preparation for it. Annie had tied his tie for him before he went ; no one else could do it so neatly.

Now it unfortunately happened that one of the cows was taken ill that day. It had been out of sorts for some little while, but nothing very serious seemed the matter till about dinner-time, when Abel the farm labourer saw it lying on its side in the Manor field, heaving and quivering convulsively, and brought it into the stable as well as he could. Mrs. Pontin had not usually the charge of the cows, and this attack of Diamond's made

her very nervous. The plain course would have been to send Abel to Oxford for a veterinary, but she said that was impossible, because he was the only man on the premises, and uncle had taken the cart to Watlington. In her heart she considered doctors of all kinds as quacks, who very excusably made a living out of the credulity of the gentry, but whom no practical person should call in except with the clergyman, to give respectability to a death-bed. Yet she felt very nervous, and as in the course of the afternoon different neighbours dropped into the cowshed to stare and say what they would do if they were she, she did not know if she was annoyed or relieved by their coming. At first she eagerly tried each of the various remedies they suggested, all of which tormented the dumb sufferer to no purpose. She even let old Betsy Todd, who could write nothing else, write *I. H. S.* on a bit of paper and tie it round the poor beast's neck. Now it was evening, and no one else came to the stable. Mrs. Pontin sat alone on an overturned bucket, staring gloomily at the sick cow, as it lay on

its side quite still, with a film over its eyes and its tongue lolling out on the straw. Sometimes it shivered a little, moaned and lifted its muzzle, showing its gums and great yellow teeth. She could not have felt worse if she had been watching a sick child, but fortunately for her she had the fatalism of her class, which if it exposes them to accident and disease, saves them from many vain hopes and weak wrestlings with resistless death. Suddenly there was a loud flapping and screaming in the poultry-yard ; animation returned to her, and she was out across the heaps of straw and dirt, among which the pigs were wallowing, hurrying along with her ungainly roll, and in at the rough timber gate of the yard.

‘If I didn’t think the fox had got in!’ she exclaimed. ‘Whatever has happened?’ Annie was waving a long stick, much longer than herself, in front of a very small and very angry young turkey-cock. His wattles were positively microscopic, and his feathers short and scanty ; but every one that he possessed stood bolt upright, as stiffly as though it had

belonged to the grandfather of all the turkeys. Shaking his thin bare neck, and uttering a shrill and sketchy imitation of the paternal gobble, he kept making threatening rushes at a cowering brood of other young turkeys, smaller than himself in body, and infinitely inferior in spirit.

‘They’ve been that quarrelsome over their food this evening!’ said Annie. ‘And this young cock would have pretty near killed one of the last brood if I hadn’t caught him over the head with the stick.’

‘Well, of all the uppish young ’uns I ever saw!’ cried Mrs. Pontin, with the ill-concealed exultation of a mamma over the naughtiness of her spirited offspring. ‘He’ll turn out a fine cock, he will! Still I can’t afford to have any of the young turkeys hurt—it’s been a rare bad season for ’em. The new brood shall go in the orchard to-morrow, but I durstn’t leave them out to-night. Master Godfrey tells me the fox got a lot of his chickens besides them turkeys of ours, last week. You just take ’em across the orchard and shut ’em away in

the old pig-sty—and mind you make the door fast, Annie,' she added, coming back and putting her head through the gate again.

To drive a brood of young and foolish turkeys, under the headship of a nervous old hen, from one given point to another, is a matter requiring time and consideration ; but with the aid of a basket of food and a long stick, Annie got them three-quarters of the way across the orchard without much difficulty. Just there stood a walnut-tree with a cart under it ; her whole mind was given to the gray long-necked brood, which was running along all together, but chirping ominously, shrill and discontented ; she noticed nothing else. The turkeys had leisurely surmounted the first shaft, one after another, and were gathered in a group pecking aimlessly at some scattered chaff before proceeding on their journey, when suddenly a dark body started up inside the cart, swayed itself for a moment on the front edge, and then, with a maniac yell of triumph, hurled itself headlong down

on the very top of the scratching, chirping family.

Then ensued a scene of horror and confusion unequalled in the annals of turkeydom. The gray hen herself, hardly escaping destruction, crept screaming from under the idiot's stomach, and fled with insensate activity, flapping up on one side of the cart only to tumble helplessly over on the other, while her nestlings scrambling forth under his arms and over his head, and stretching themselves in their terror to the merest combination of necks and legs, tore deliriously to every remotest corner of the orchard.

'Naughty Albert ! Bad, wicked boy !' cried Annie angrily ; 'how dare you jump on the turkeys !'

The idiot boy lay on the ground, striking out with arms and legs in a paroxysm of delight, chuckling convulsively. With a movement as sudden as that of a mechanical toy he jerked himself into a crouching posture, and seized her dress with his dirty, long-nailed, claw-like hands, his great mouth seeming to divide his head in half as it

yawned up at her in an insane grin. She tried to pull it from him, but gibbering inarticulately he thrust the pink cotton flounce between his teeth, and began gradually sucking and chewing inch after inch into his mouth, like a brown bloated reptile slowly absorbing its prey. The great mouth, the wide vibrating nostrils, the low brow abnormally overgrown with hair, the one small eye, rolling with a kind of rage, and seeming to glare unnaturally in comparison to its blank dead fellow—the whole monstrous indescribable aspect of the creature, exercised a kind of fascination over Annie, and for a few moments she stood trembling and paralysed, as though he were indeed an obscene reptile and she an animal destined to disappear between his distended jaws. Then starting away in a passion of terror, she struck at him again and again with the stick she carried in her hand. The long elastic stick stung him sharply on the back, and head, and legs, and arms ; and, with a yell of rage and pain, he let her go, and rolled under the cart for shelter, cursing her with ugly articulate curses,

for the only words he had learned besides words for food were filthy or profane. Released from Albert her anxiety about the turkeys returned at once. They were running in twos and threes by the hedge, still discoursing in agitated and important tones on the late catastrophe, but beginning to let their thoughts wander to the pleasures of the chase. It required much tact and patience on her part to lead them back into the path of duty and finally marshal them into the disused pig-sty. Just as she was looking for a peg to fasten the door, she caught a glimpse through a gap in the hedge and over the low stone wall of the farmyard of some one passing in the lane leading a cart-horse. It was the merest glimpse, such as might not have sufficed her to recognise another person, but it put a feverish anxiety into her search for the peg. She had promised Jess to run out on Sunday morning and tell him whether she might walk with him, but this she had not been allowed to do. It seemed centuries before a suitable stick presented itself; at last it was found, and pushing it into the

fastening of the door; she tore along the orchard. Whisking over the gate, skimming along the track through the bean-field, and over another gate in a twinkling, she flew rather than ran down the hill, over the sharp, loose stones of the lane, calling out 'Jess! Jess!'

He turned and waited, his face unusually bright and flushed with pleasure and surprise, till she stood before him, panting.

'Good evenin', Annie. I was wondering when I should see you.'

'Oh, Jess!' she cried. 'They wouldn't let me come!'

'I thought as how they wouldn't,' he said, the light going out of his face.

'I oughtn't to have come now, but I couldn't help it,' she went on hurriedly.

'What did they say?' he asked.

'They said—all kinds o' silly things,' she answered, crumpling her apron with her fingers. 'Jess, I'm not to work in the garden with you again, and I'm afraid uncle won't like it if you walk back from church with me.'

'I knowed they'd say that,' he said, quite

pale ; and he leaned his forehead against the old brown horse, which was engaged in pulling mouthfuls of the yellow wayside grass.

‘Of course I’m only a work’us lad,’ he went on after a few moments, pausing between each phrase. ‘I don’t suppose as my wages ’ll ever be much better nor they are now. I ain’t one of the sharp chaps as can get on. I know’d what they’d say.’

Annie had been sorry for herself as well as for Jesse before ; she had felt, too, a kind of shyness at the new relation in which her uncle and aunt’s words had placed her to him. Now she was nothing but sorry for him. She too went quite pale.

‘Please don’t talk so, Jess,’ she cried, clasping her hands tight. ‘I don’t care a bit about the work’us or anything—I like you best of any one.’

‘Do you really?’ he asked eagerly, lifting his forehead from the side of the brown horse. ‘Really, Annie? And you won’t forget me when you ain’t allowed to talk to me?’

‘No, I won’t,’ she answered earnestly. ‘But I haven’t promised never to talk to

you ; only I mustn't stop now, indeed I mustn't.'

'I wonder when I shall see you again?' he asked, holding her, with eyes reluctant to let go the sight of her. 'Not for a long time, most likely. Will you promise to give me something I want?'

'I promise,' said Annie. 'What is it?'

'Just one kiss, Annie—only one,' in a low voice.

'Oh, Jess, I don't know whether it's right.'

'Where's the harm? Anyhow, you've promised. Just one kiss, Annie—I'll stand quite still.'

He stooped, and she, with downcast eyes and lifted mouth, gave him a shy quick kiss; a ghost of a kiss, to be enjoyed in recollection rather than in actuality.

Just at that moment a hoarse scream of 'Annie! Annie!' rung down the lane. It was aunt's voice, uplifted in wrath.

'Come back direckly, direckly, I say, you good-for-nothing girl! Get along with you, Jesse Williams, get along with you, you work'us varmint. Only just let me catch

you hanging about *my* premises again—I'll teach you!' and so on and so on, while Annie was running up the hill towards the enraged speaker. Mrs. Pontin seized her by the fragile shoulders and shook her as she might have shaken a child of two.

'You slut! you drab!' she shrieked. 'Such conduct I never see! Kissing and palavering about the high roads with the very work'us ploughboys. You come wi' me, I say, you nasty baggage, you little sly hussy!' and she dragged her along towards the gate of the farmyard. 'Them's your dratted mother's ways,' she went on, 'not mine nor any honest woman's. A disreputable baggage, that's what she is, and that's what you are—not fit to be in a respectable family. Can't ye answer, ye brat?' and she shook her again. But Annie did not answer. She met her aunt's violence as she had been accustomed to meet her mother's, by passive resistance, like a small animal retreating into its shell. To do Mrs. Pontin justice, though she was always irritable, the girl had never seen her in such a temper

before. But not only had she a mortal aversion to youthful indiscretions of this nature, but the long afternoon spent with the sick cow, during which she had refused all refreshment, had been a great strain upon her system, and it was a relief to find some one on whom to vent her nervous excitement. Across the farmyard, where even the ancestral swine, lying on their sides among the manure, large and livid and baggy, winked in astonishment as the shrill human hurricane swept by, up the steep stairs to the attic, aunt went hurrying her victim, pouring forth all the time, as well as her short breath would allow her, a flood of Billingsgate as choice as may be learned in the rural seclusion of High Cross; which is, however, richer in such language than the proud denizen of cities might suppose. 'You stay there till uncle comes back!' she cried at last, flinging her on the bed; 'he shall hear all about it, every bit, he shall. Lor, to think a niece of his should be such a shameless thing, with her kissing and goings on! I don't know how ever he'll bear to have you in the house.'

Annie was stung into reply.

‘He needn’t if he don’t wish,’ she answered proudly. ‘I can go to service, the same as other girls.’

‘You can, can you?’ snorted aunt. ‘Who’d have ye, ye awkward disreputable brat? *I* ain’t going to give ye a character, so don’t think it’—and there followed a long list of Annie’s imperfections, real and supposed, ending with ‘So here you stays till uncle comes home; and you needn’t expect your supper, for it won’t come.’

She flounced out of the room, turned the key in the lock, and thumped heavily down the stairs.

Annie lay for a long time on her face on the bed, till the pillow was damp with her tears, and till it was dry again. When she sat up the little room was dark, and the house perfectly quiet. She could hear nothing except the sound of the breeze and the small rain in the elm-trees opposite. She bathed her face, and shut the window, where the chill drops came trickling in; then she began to undress, shivering, and feeling either

sick or hungry, she was not sure which. When she had got off her boots and stockings there was a great noise on the steep attic stairs—a noise as though some heavy person were trying to run up them, stumbling blindly and falling about with maledictory groans and ejaculations and quick stertorous breathings. Annie's heart stood still ; she remembered a woman in London who had made a noise like that on the stairs, had burst the door open and rolled down into the middle of their room, with clenched hands and swollen face, and foam on her convulsed mouth. Her aunt, she thought, must have a fit coming on and be trying to get to her, as the only other person in the house. What should she do? She felt about for matches, but there were none ; and she could only wait till the trembling hand outside touched the door, fumbled at the key and the handle, and at last turned them. It was a positive relief when Mrs. Pontin fell rather than walked into the room, and flumped down on a low wooden box by the door. She was carrying a lantern, which she de-

posited on the floor, so that the concentrated light slanted up on to her face. On any countenance the effect of a light immediately below, throwing the shadows of the features up into unnatural places, is curious ; on Mrs. Pontin's at that moment it was frightful. Her face was dark red and puffy, the swollen veins were standing out on her neck and forehead, her double chin and large purple lips quivered as she gasped and slobbered inarticulate. Quick as thought Annie dipped a sponge in cold water and stepped up to put it on her aunt's forehead ; but as quickly it was wrenched from her, her slender wrists were caught in Mrs. Pontin's powerful grip, and with a roar like that of a wild beast she sent the girl staggering back to the opposite wall, against which in another second the wet sponge came slapping close to her head, and fell down in a little pool of its own making. The woman's small eyes were rolling and glittering, red like the eyes of some infuriated animal ; her flesh quivered and her very hair seemed to bristle with rage.

‘Oh, aunt, what is the matter?’ cried Annie.

Mrs. Pontin made one or two spasmodic attempts to speak, but no definite word passed her lips. Then, with an effort, she heaved her massive body up from the low seat, and came and stood quite close, face to face with Annie, who was leaning against the wall ; and bringing her heavy hand down on the child’s shrinking shoulder—

‘You devil!’ she said, in a hoarse whisper.

Terrified as Annie was, she noticed that her aunt’s breath smelt of whisky, and was surprised at it, for Mrs. Pontin was a temperate woman, content with her two glasses of beer a day. A silence followed the hoarse ejaculation, during which Annie’s thoughts showed her the utter emptiness of the house except for them two, the desertedness even of the neighbouring roads at this hour. She was very much frightened.

‘Whatever *is* the matter?’ she managed to ask again, whispering herself.

Mrs. Pontin began to regain her powers of utterance.

‘Where are my turkeys?’ she said, still hoarse, but in a less muffled voice.

‘What turkeys?’ asked Annie bewildered.

‘*What* turkeys? *What* turkeys?’ broke out Mrs. Pontin, loud and harsh. ‘You hussy! How dare ye pretend not to know what turkeys you was to shut up in the pig-sty.’

‘I shut up the new brood,’ said Annie, trying to understand.

‘You shut up ’em up, did ye? Shut ’em up! Ho, ho! Ha, ha! That’s a good ’un!’ And Mrs. Pontin laughed a laugh of hysterical frenzy. Then, relapsing again into more sullen fury, she took the soft flesh of the girl’s arm in her short strong-nailed hand and pinched it with all her might.

‘Ye’re a bloody liar!’ she roared, still further irritated, if possible, because her victim did not cry out with the pain.

Then snatching up the lantern, she dragged Annie towards the door.

‘Just let me put my boots on, aunt,’ said Annie, with the exterior calmness which often belied her terrors; ‘my feet are all bare.’

‘I wouldn’t let ye stop a minute, not if

you was naked !' retorted aunt fiercely ; and they went out down the two steep flights of stairs, the elder woman partly pushing the girl, partly leaning with heavy staggering weight upon her.

They had to cross the poultry-yard to reach the orchard, and Annie's bare feet were cut by the gravel and then plunged into the cold wet grass. The sky was cloudy, but not yet dark ; it still reflected the gray diffused light of a summer night—an English summer night, which if it is not divine, is infinitely dreary. When they got to the pig-sty they could see without the help of the lantern that it was wide open. Aunt let go of Annie and pointed to it in silence, with a tragic gesture ; then, with something between a moan and a cry, she laid her head upon the open gate and burst into a paroxysm of sobs that heaved and shook every inch of her big body.

'The largest brood as ever I had,' she wailed, 'and the last as I shall get this year—and now the fox 'll have 'em, every one.'

'Oh no, aunt,' said Annie, 'I don't know

how they've got out, but he can't have caught 'em all yet ; they must be somewhere in the orchard.'

Mrs. Pontin leapt from lamentation to wrath once more.

'Why should they stop in the orchard,' she screamed, 'when they could march into the bean-field, the lot of them at once? If you *was* in such a hurry to get to your feller, you needn't have opened the gate as wide as it 'ud go.'

'I didn't open it,' answered Annie ; 'I climbed over and fastened this door first.'

'How dare you lie so !' cried Mrs. Pontin ; and seizing the long stick which Annie had left leaning against the pig-sty, she brought it whistling down upon her.

'Aunt, aunt !' pleaded the girl, writhing and biting her lips ; 'don't, please don't. I did shut the turkeys up—I didn't open the gate ; I really didn't. I don't know who can have let them out, unless it was Albert. He was here this evening, and then he was naughty with the turkeys, and then I hit him.'

‘You did, did you, miss?’ And the stick bent once more across her back. ‘Poor little innocent! I’ll teach you to be cruel to him, and then put off your naughtiness on him, poor little feller! I could beat the skin off you, I could.’

Down came the stinging stick, again and yet again, until she had the satisfaction of wringing a cry from the child’s set white lips. Then she threw it down, and dragged her through the gate, which undoubtedly stood wide open, and up and down the broad sloping bean-field, in frantic search for the errant brood.

‘What with the cow dying, and the turkeys and all, I’m just dead beat,’ moaned aunt. She pulled a fresh candle out of her pocket, lit it, and stuck it in the lantern with trembling fingers. ‘It’s you as have lost the turkeys, miss; and you must find ’em. If you can’t, you must just stay out all night, the same as they do. So don’t you come back without ’em, unless you want your bones broken.’

She crammed the lantern into Annie’s

hand, gave her a farewell push, and disappeared into the gathering darkness. For the gray distinctness of things was vanishing ; a cloud, heavier and lower than those which had before veiled the sky, was rising and spreading from the far horizon, which itself had dropped into a gulf of blackness. The ponderous elms, darker than night itself, alone retained their outline, whispering and tossing above the hedgerows in the rainy gusts. There was something ghostly in the stream of light that moved at Annie's side, sometimes throwing her own tremulous grotesque shadow over the dry bents and deep ruts of the cart-track, but mostly striking across the field, where the beans that in June had stood up in ranks of blossom and sweetness now leaned heavily against each other, gaunt and naked and black, like an army of charred skeletons.

At first it was a relief to be free from Mrs. Pontin, and she looked eagerly for the turkeys, but gradually her search became mechanical ; she began to be invaded by a childish terror of the wide black midnight, in which no

human creature except herself was abroad, the faint mysterious sounds that came sighing up from the invisible country below, the sharp strange rustlings and snappings in the foliage and grass around her, and above all the white patch of light, with its edge of black wavering shadow, that followed her wherever she went. Her naked feet were very sore, and her whole body ached. A fine rain had been falling at intervals, and at last when a heavier shower came blowing up the hill she crouched down under a bramble bush in the hedge and made an attempt to shut away the haunting light; but the lantern was out of order and would not close. So she hid her face in her lap and tried to think of something else.

CHAPTER IV

IT was terribly lonesome in the bean-field, terribly lonesome in the world. Everything that had happened since she spoke to her uncle about Jess the morning before came back with great distinctness to her mind ; it seemed all to happen over again. The shameful unjust words, the cruel blows, stung more in the recollection than when she had actually suffered them ; body and soul she was chilled and sore and bleeding, and there was no one to succour her. She knew the politics of the farm too well to hope for much support from her uncle in opposition to his wife, and was too young to gauge the amount of permanent meaning that lay behind her aunt's violent expressions. Life seemed endlessly stern and barren. There was no one to love, no one to love her, except poor

Jess, and him she would never be allowed to be friends with any more. Why, oh why had her father died? He was dead, hidden deep in the ground a long way off, and could not hear her, however loud she might call; yet she could not help crying out, 'Father! father!' The sound of her own voice startled her, and with a sudden revulsion of feeling she cowered down, hiding her eyes up still closer with her hands. She had a distinct and horrible impression that if she looked round she would see her father, in his grave-clothes, sitting by her in the stream of white light. To stay there or to move seemed equally impossible; but this torture could not be endured. She *must* fly somewhere; and there was only one place, one person, her bewildered mind turned to. With a great effort she jumped up, seized the lantern and fled up the field, feeling imaginary pursuers clutching close behind, and her own heart beating big and hot in her throat. Quickly she scrambled over the gate, across the lane and into the Manor field. There was something homely and comforting about the very

air there, and the noise the old white pony made blowing a loud breath through his nostrils. Her initial impulse had been to rush straight to Jesse's door and call him out ; but when she got close to the octagonal house she paused, the realities of life came back to her, and she thought of the interpretation which would certainly be put upon her conduct, not by Jesse, but by any one else, if they knew. In her class a girl cannot remain ignorant of evil. However, in that black solitary night there seemed little danger of any one else knowing. Besides, every now and then a curious vein of recklessness appeared in her, seemingly out of all relation to the main stuff of her character ; a bit of the hard defiantness of Selina, embedded in the sober and sensitive paternal nature. If she was to be called bad names, anyhow, she thought, what did it matter whether she behaved respectably or not ? She threw a handful of small stones at the window, and beat with a larger one at the door. It may be that love makes even a ploughboy's sleep lighter than usual ; it is certain that Jesse

heard the noise, opened the window, and put his head out to know who was there.

‘It’s me—Annie,’ in a voice low, but audible to him.

There was an exclamation, the spurt of a match, a pause while he scrambled on the necessary garments, and then he came down with his candle in his hand and opened the door. Surprise, untempered as yet even by pleasure at the sight of Annie, was staring from his every feature.

‘Is the house a-fire?’ he asked, that being the only exciting possibility that occurred to him.

‘No—no—but—— Oh, Jess, she’ve turned me out, she’ve turned me out!’ She leaned her head against the stone jamb of the door and began to sob violently. He put the candle down on the brick floor and drew her into the room, which was empty except for some sacking and old harness. Presently she found herself sobbing with her head on Jesse’s shoulder, and in broken words she had made him understand how things were. It was not in his nature to break out into

violent expletives, but he went so far as to say that Mrs. Pontin was 'worse nor a brute beast.'

'Why, you're reg'lar wet through, and as cold as a stone,' he said, feeling her dress and hands.

It was true ; and now that the strain on her nerves was relieved, she begun to be keenly conscious of physical pain and discomfort.

'There ain't no grate nor anything here,' he went on. 'And I've got a nice fire laid upstairs, and the breakfast things as I put ready for the morning. Do come up, Annie, and dry yourself a bit, and I'll make you a cup of tea.'

She hesitated a minute.

'Do come,' he urged ; and then reproachfully, 'Can't you trust me to behave right by you ?'

'Oh yes,' she answered ; 'it was other folks I thought of. But it don't make any difference if I'm here or upstairs.'

'No one 'll know,' he said. 'You can go back to the orchard afore they're stirring. You'll just catch your death like this.'

They went upstairs, and Annie sat down with her feet in the broken brass fender. The flame sprung crackling from the dry wood and gave an impression of warmth and cheerfulness, though as yet there was little heat in it. Jesse moved about getting out the breakfast things, the little black tea-pot and battered kettle. He was full of pity and mild indignation, but he could not help feeling it very sweet to wait upon her, to have her sitting in his room and using his things. He would have liked to chafe her cold hands and feet back to life, but his kindness and tenderness did for him what the fine traditions of chivalry do for gentlemen, and made him avoid anything that might seem like taking advantage of her temporary dependence on him. Annie laid her head on the table and closed her eyes; she said nothing, and Jess also sat silently on the fender, feeding and poking the fire under the kettle, which was as slow to boil as the proverbial watched pot. Gradually she dropped off to sleep. She did not know whether she had slept minutes or hours when.

she was woke by voices downstairs. One was a well-known angry voice, that sent the hot blood to her heart and made her jump up from her chair. The room was dark except for the firelight, Jesse was no longer there; she could hear his low stammer through her aunt's high-pitched objurgations. A shower of coarse epithets was falling thick and fast upon herself and her 'feller,' her 'work'us varmint.' She had heard most of them already that evening, but somehow they seemed worse this time. They had given her pain before, but at bottom she had felt more indignation than shame at them; now each word fell heavily on her heart, like a stroke of doom. She stood transfixed, unable to move or cry out. The door below shut, there was silence, and then Jesse creaked up the stairs with the candle. She made a staggering step towards him, wide-eyed and deadly pale, her hands clasped tightly together.

'Tell me—tell me——' she gasped.

'Oh, Annie, Annie dear, don't take on!' was all he answered.

She allowed herself to be put back in the chair, and leaned against the table with her forehead on her hand.

'It was my fault,' he said penitently, after a pause; 'I ought to ha' explained it more. But she talked that fast I couldn't get my words out—you know, Annie, I always am stupid like.'

'What did she say?' asked Annie.

He hesitated.

'She said as you wasn't to go back to the farm nohow. But never you mind what she says; there's your uncle will be back to-morrow, and he'll think different.'

Annie shook her head.

'No, he won't—why should he?' she asked, with a calm dull scepticism, as though they were discussing some one else's case.

'He won't believe as there's anything wrong between us,' cried Jess eagerly, 'because it's not the truth.'

'It's not the truth for us, but it's the truth for other folks. I can't say as I wasn't here,' Annie returned stubbornly, with the precocious worldly wisdom of the town-bred girl;

a worldly wisdom that had availed her so little in the stress of action.

‘How did aunt find out?’ she asked presently.

‘I don’t know,’ answered Jess, putting the kettle back on the fire. ‘It was summat to do with the dratted lantern.’

They were silent again, Annie staring at the table, dipping her finger in a little pool of milk that had been spilt upon it, and drawing lines on the shiny cloth cover. This calm, the calm of an exhausted body and nerves dulled by a succession of shocks, puzzled and alarmed the simple Jess. It was natural for girls to cry, and he would have known more or less what to say if Annie had cried; but it was difficult to address vague, comforting, petting words to this stony creature. He made a cup of tea and pushed it towards her, but she did not touch it; then he kneeled down by her and held it to her lips.

‘Do’ee drink it now, my dear,’ he said coaxingly, like a mother talking to a sick child; ‘it’ll make you feel a lot better.’

She drank it and laid her head on his shoulder with a long moaning sigh. She sighed once or twice again, perhaps she may have shed a few tears ; then quite suddenly she fell asleep. He went on kneeling up with her head on his shoulder. At first it was sweet to hold her there, to feel her breathing and her soft hair against his cheek, but soon he began to feel sleepy and cramped and tired. To persons of highly imaginative temperament there is an actual pleasure in physical or other pain endured for the sake of those they love, but such persons are not usually agriculturally employed. Jess loved Annie with a love that for tenderness and a kind of chivalry could not have been matched in High Cross ; but by the time she had been leaning upon him for half an hour he would have been thankful to lay her down. He feared to do so, lest he should wake her from this deep sleep, which he instinctively felt to be very necessary to her, body and mind. He had been carting manure all the day before and had another hard day's work awaiting him. His left arm

and shoulder got very stiff, his knees ached, and he had pins and needles in his feet and legs; moreover, his candle was burning down, and it was the only one that he had. He managed to reach the candle and put it out with his finger; after that he held on quite still for what seemed to him hours and hours, till the position became almost intolerable.

‘I don’t know as I *can* stand it much longer,’ he whispered to himself.

A little while after she moved, cried out and threw herself back. For a moment he could think of nothing but the relief; he jumped up and stretched himself, with sighs of comfort. Then he thought of Annie again, and struck a match under the table. She had fallen back in the old beehive chair, uncomfortably enough, but still she was asleep. He dared not lay himself on the bed and go off as sound as she, lest he should not wake in another hour, when the world’s work and his share in it began again. He crouched down before the dying embers and fell into weary uneasy dreams, between sleep-

ing and waking, while coldly the September dawn arose and the long undulations of the distant hills began to outline themselves, dim and unsubstantial, against the gray still sky.

When Mrs. Pontin left Annie in the bean-field she was really tired out. She had eaten nothing since the twelve o'clock dinner. After she had shut the girl up in her room she had gone out to the cow, and found it so much worse that she had rushed for a bottle of whisky, thinking that if it did no good it could do no harm. It did not do any good, for the cow died ; and then she took a sip of it herself, a little sip that would not have affected her under ordinary conditions, but acting on an empty stomach, served to further excite her already irritated nerves, and in fact almost to intoxicate her. When she had turned Annie out she had some supper and went to bed, but she could not sleep comfortably ; she could not lose the feeling that something was wrong. She woke up, and thought of the girl spending the night out-of-doors ; and it worried her.

Not that she relented towards Annie ; on the contrary, the uneasy sense that her own conduct in the matter was open to criticism made her all the more determined to take such a view of her niece's behaviour as most justified that conduct. She got up and stood at her window, which looked over the orchard. At that moment a light appeared, coming quickly up the field ; she saw it go across the lane and through the gate of the Manor. She could hardly believe her eyes. Was it Annie ? If not, who was it ? She dressed hastily and went into the bean-field, hunting and calling high and low ; but there was no Annie. Then she went into the Manor field ; she saw a light in Jesse's window, and her own lantern, the candle flaring and flickering low in the socket, but still burning, close against his door. Annie had put it down there and forgotten it. Mrs. Pontin did not hesitate for a moment ; she knocked and shouted, and the reluctant Jesse appeared. He was not capable of furnishing an answer to a question on the spur of the moment, of denying or evading the truth ;

all he could do was to receive her volley of abuse into his own bosom, and prevent her penetrating upstairs to Annie. She returned to the farm in a glow of triumphant infallibility, which she mistook for indignation ; but next morning she again felt a most uncomfortable necessity to defend her own conduct. So she dwelt on what Annie had done, and implied from that other things which it seemed to her probable that the girl had done, till actualities and probabilities were hopelessly conglomerated in her mind. At last she was prepared to swear that Annie had constantly spent her evenings in Jesse's room, and was in the habit of neglecting her work to philander with passers-by in the lane. Considering what Selina was, it might be inferred that her daughter was already corrupted when she came to the farm, and that Mrs. Pontin had shown some forbearance in treating her so well up till now. That exemplary matron was too well occupied to be much of a gossip as a rule, but it was intolerably unsatisfactory to justify herself only to herself, and she managed to get

round to Cousin Robinson's soon after breakfast, there to rehearse in full the tale she had to tell James Pontin on his return. How much of it was truth and how much invention she herself knew at last as little as any one. There are three roads up to High Cross from the Oxford highway—roads which obligingly furnish the inhabitants of the place with matter for discussion from one generation to another; as, though no one denies they are all bad, there is room for wide divergences of opinion as to their relative badness.

Mr. Pontin was a partisan of the way round by the Hall, where for the most part you come up gently; but unluckily to-day he had a friend to drop in the direction of Oxford, so he came the short cut between the high banks, where the hill is so steep the road is actually unable to hang on to it, and is always moving down like a glacier, only in a quicker and more disjointed fashion. High over it a gray dilapidated gable-end peers down through some gnarled apple-branches. This is Cousin Robinson's farm. From the orchard

Mrs. Robinson saw Cousin Pontin driving up the lane, and she could not help calling out to him and letting him know what sad doings there had been at home in his absence. There was no point on which James Pontin was so sensitive as the old-established respectability of his family. It was bad enough to have relations far away in great cities who fell from its traditional standard; but to have it disgraced by this London girl in his own house, in his own village, was bitter indeed. By the time he alighted at the door of the farm he was very angry, in the sullen, silent, not undignified way which characterised him. It made him all the more outraged and sore that he had begun to feel a kind of passive attachment to Annie.

Meanwhile she sat waiting for him in the hedge by the road he usually selected, looking out with a beating heart whenever she heard the noise of wheels, and half-relieved, half-disappointed, when they turned out not to be those of his cart. She had taken the desperate resolution of meeting him and pleading her cause before aunt had prejudiced

him against her. If she missed him, Jesse was to come at the dinner-hour and they were to proceed together to the farm. When the church clock struck twelve, Jesse came and told her her uncle had been seen driving home an hour ago. Then she began to tremble at the thought of the impending interview.

‘Oh, Jess, I can’t go,’ she said.

Jess pushed his hat back and rubbed his head.

‘What’ll you do then, Annie?’ he asked.

‘Oh, it’s only talk,’ she answered. ‘Of course I must go really.’

And they slunk up the fields at the back of the village, lest any one should notice her bare feet. As they came through the bean-field to the orchard the air was still and heavy. There was no one about among the stacks or in the poultry-yard, and the back-door of the house was, as usual, wide open. They went and stood in the wide stone passage that ran through to the front; no one had noticed them come, for the sound of their footsteps was covered by the rattling of plates in the

kitchen and the roll of the approaching thunder.

Annie was just trying to summon courage to announce her presence, when her uncle opened the kitchen door and stood face to face with her.

‘Ah!’ he said. There was a world of hardness and anger in the exclamation.

Annie stepped forward quickly and caught him by the sleeve; she was trembling very much.

‘Uncle,’ she cried, ‘please, please do listen to me. I’ll tell you the truth—indeed I will.’

He paused, and then said sternly :

‘There’s only one question as I want an answer to. Was you or was you not with Jesse Williams last night?’

‘Yes—yes, I was,’ she answered, with eager quickness. ‘But I’ll tell you how it happened, and all about it.’

‘I don’t want to hear anything about it,’ he said brutally, flinging her from him against the wall. ‘What’s the good?—you’re a slut.’

‘O, Mr. Pontin, sir,’ Jesse broke in, stammering and rubbing his hat hard against his knee,

'there ain't been nothing wrong between us, I do assure you. It was all on account of the rain she come to me.'

'Pho! There were plenty she might ha' gone to.'

'Who was there, uncle?' asked Annie, with a great effort preventing her voice from breaking down. 'I don't know no one here except aunt's friends, and I didn't like to go to them and say as she'd turned me out.'

'I suppose you're tellin' how cru'l I've been to you, miss,' cried aunt defiantly, coming out of the kitchen—'a hussy I've been that kind and forbearin' with! And you as beat poor little Albert a'most to death!'

'Hold your tongue, Jane,' said the farmer peremptorily. 'Leave me to settle this here matter.' Then turning to Annie—'Can you swear as that was the first time you was ever inside Williams's house?'

She blushed and hung her head. In fact she had been in the habit of leaving socks and other small articles she had mended for Jesse in the lower room, and had once or twice taken shelter there from the rain.

‘I was never upstairs before,’ she answered huskily.

‘Upstairs or down, have you often been there before?’

‘Yes—yes—but,’ with repressed strangling sobs, ‘I can tell you how it was. There wasn’t any harm in it; there wasn’t indeed.’

‘But I say there was harm in it; I say there was.’

And drowning her broken explanations in the clatter of his nailed boots, he strode to the front door and set it wide open, then he came back, and pointing at it said :

‘That’s your way. March, now—you’ve brought nothing into this house but shame, and you shall take nothing out of it but shame.’

And holding her by the arms, he forced her backwards towards the door, not with any violence, but firmly and strongly.

‘Uncle! uncle!’ she gasped desperately; then, as they reached the threshold, clinging with both hands to the loose front of his coat in passionate entreaty, the tears running down her cheeks, she cried :

‘I’m an honest girl ; I swear I am ! Listen, only just listen to what I’ve got to say. Don’t send me away without giving me a chance to speak !’

‘You mustn’t talk as if I’d done that,’ he retorted sternly. ‘I’ve asked you plain questions and you’ve given me plain answers. That being so, you couldn’t tell me anything as would alter my ’pinion of you.’

Jesse had been stammering for some time, trying to get out something. At last he said :

‘Mr. Pontin, sir, I’m ready and willing to marry Annie to-morrow, if that would cause you to think different of her.’

The farmer turned to him with a short bitter laugh.

‘It ’ud be a mighty fine thing for me to get a work’us boy for my nevvie, wouldn’t it ? You may do as you please, Williams, it won’t make no difference to me. Her conduct in my house have been shameful, and it’s the last time as she’ll darken this door !’

Then pushing them both over the threshold, he raised his voice in final sentence :

‘So you understand, Annie Pontin, from this day forrard you’re no kin of mine.’

He banged the heavy oak door violently to ; at the same moment Annie started forward and it caught her a dazing blow on the forehead. She give one exceeding bitter cry and sank down against it, with her forehead on the iron scraper, which she grasped tightly with both hands and almost shook in the frenzy of her despair. It seemed impossible, quite impossible, that she could be thrown out of life, as it were, into mere desolate nothingness, like that—so suddenly, so unprepared. It could only be a hideous dream that would be over in a few minutes. But it was her own fault—why hadn’t she answered her uncle’s questions differently? Why hadn’t she made him see the truth? Then, again, as Jesse lifted her up, she shrieked aloud, ‘Uncle! uncle! only do listen!’ and beat and pushed against the door with her hands and elbows. Jesse walked to the gate and looked round, revolving things in his mind slowly as was his wont. When he turned again she was standing on the narrow paved

path, crying and talking to herself, and mechanically wiping the blood from her hands and arms ; for the loose rough iron studs of the old door had scratched them severely.

It was high time to take shelter. A heavy thunder-cloud, black, with a reddish glare at its edges, was hanging low over the hill ; the weight of it seemed almost to rest on the great elm-trees, towering in absolute stillness above them. There was twilight everywhere, around and below, but not the transparent twilight of dawn or evening ; the air seemed thick—when they looked at each other it was as though a crape veil hung between their faces, and the wide valley below was submerged in a quivering lurid murkiness. The labourers had left the fields and the straggling village street was quite deserted ; one felt that in every darkening cottage the ordinary occupations of the day were suspended, and there was a little group awaiting with a kind of excitement, perhaps terror, the first crash of the storm.

Annie let Jesse lead her out of the garden, and then she stood still under the elms.

They were so high and at such a short distance from the house, that it seemed as though some day, in a great gale or a thunder-storm, one of them must inevitably come crashing down upon the roof. They had been there two hundred years and nothing had happened, but Annie had often felt nervous about them when she looked out of her little bedroom window into their great boughs, tossing and creaking in the winter wind or swaying under the burden of their summer foliage. Now she stood waiting just under them.

‘You didn’t ought to stop here, Annie,’ said Jess. ‘Where will you go?’

‘Where shall I go?’ she repeated. Then, after a pause—‘Why to the work’us, I suppose.’

There was a deafening crash immediately overhead; a noise as though some Titan had blasted the whole heaven to fragments, followed by a long reverberating roar. A sheet of violet flame broke simultaneously from the centre of the sky and the long line of the distant hills over Oxford. Magdalen tower, the dome of the Radcliffe, the tall spire of St. Mary’s, every pinnacle and turret

of the far-off city flashed out pale and distinct for several seconds in the livid purple glare of the lightning, and disappeared again into darkness. Involuntarily the two young people had started together as the thunder burst over them ; when it was over, Annie let go of Jess and began to run fast in the direction of a steep track that led to the lower part of the village. It was rough and she stumbled at the top, recovered herself, but paused long enough for Jess to come up with her.

‘Where are you going, Annie?’ he asked again, white and frowning. He had caught her by the wrists, and they stood face to face for a minute or so, while the thunder, leaving the hill, seemed to be rolling round their feet.

‘To the work’us,’ she answered again, sombrely.

‘I can’t let ye go there,’ he cried, ‘I can’t.’

There was a great rushing sound rapidly nearing them ; a cloud of chaff, blown from some neighbouring stack-yard, came tossing and whirling along the road and on down the village street. The giant elm-trees shivered a moment, and then with a groan bent their

heads to the tempest, struggling in its grasp till their mighty arms clashed heavily against each other, beat upon the shaft of the cross and sometimes almost swept the ground, where twigs and leaves and chaff were lying and flying confusedly. Immediately on the first rush of the wind followed a blinding downpour of rain and hail, lashing the road and rattling on the roofs of the village, as though an aerial regiment were galloping over them.

Jesse was talking to Annie quickly, unlike himself, but at first the noise of the storm prevented her from distinguishing what he said ; she could only perceive that he was trembling all over, and that his heavy healthy face, transformed in an agony of passion and entreaty, was haggard and ashy pale. Then her ears became accustomed to the noise, and she heard him saying :

‘You’ll never put up with it—you don’t know what it’s like, as I do.’

‘I shan’t stay there ; I shall go to service,’ she returned.

‘No one ’ll have you,’ he argued—‘no one

as is good for anything. You're as like as not to get into dreadful trouble. Oh, Annie, Annie darling!' he broke out, 'what's the good? When I love you so, why should you go away and leave me?'

'Because I must be an honest girl,' she answered desperately, looking away and trying to free herself.

'What's the use?' he urged. 'Your uncle's turned agen you, and no one 'll believe what you say. What's the use, when I'm ready and willing to marry you the first day as ever I can? Why, Annie dear, it's all I want, to have you to myself and show how I love you. How can you think I won't behave right by you, when if I was as rich as a lord I'd give it all just to marry you?'

The violent wind blew his hat away, but he did not leave go of her to catch it; only looking up for a moment, he seemed to realise for the first time that the rain was coming down in bucketsful and that they were both wet to the skin. He began dragging her along towards the Manor.

'Any way, you can't be out in this,' he

said. 'You must take shelter till the storm's over.'

There was a little carved doorway in the Manor wall, close to the summer-house. They reached it quickly, and Annie stopped.

'Look, I'm wet through already,' she said. 'You might as well let me go.'

He caught her in his arms and clasped her strongly, almost violently. 'No!' he cried, 'no!'

They stood in the doorway, sheltered by the thickness of the wall. Below them the foliage rustled, the orchard trees, the walnuts and elms all bowed one way like corn, beneath the white rush of the rain. Behind that stormy veil, a mile or two away, stood a square building in a wide, gray field. Within it all was rough and cold and cheerless, beyond it lay—what? The arms that held her were strong and warm, the eyes that looked into hers were full of love and anguish and entreaty. Her lips moved, he opened the door and they passed through.

CHAPTER V

THE shock and exposure to which Annie had been subjected naturally brought on an illness. It was not so severe as might have been expected, but the very afternoon of her arrival at the Manor she became heavy, feverish, and finally light-headed. Jesse was frightened, and next day called in Mr. Evans, the parish doctor, and Betsy Todd, to see to her while he was at work. When she got better she said no more about the workhouse, but she waited for Jesse to tell her he had made arrangements for their marriage.

One evening, when he was sitting with his arm round her, he said :

‘Annie darling, I ask Mr. Shepherd about our being married, and he says me being only nineteen we can’t be married without father gives his consent, so I thought I’d walk into

Oxford o' Sunday and leave a message at the Crown against he comes there.'

Mr. Shepherd had made a mistake, but a common one, and particularly to be excused in his case, because he himself had been married under age by license, and remembered having to swear that he had his guardian's consent. Most youths in Jesse's position would have gone to their clergyman for advice, but no one ever thought of going to Mr. Hayes. He was an old man, one of those unliterary authors and unlearned students who are among the curious by-products of theology, and had written some family prayers and works on Unfulfilled Prophecy which had had a certain sale. He would have found it difficult to say what he did now, all day long in his musty little study, but he had acquired a habit of being annoyed at interruptions, and consequently he was seldom interrupted.

It seems strange to the educated that people should be content to sit down with hearsay information on some point of vital importance to themselves, but it is the common practice of the poor. It did not occur

to Jesse, or even to Annie, that that excellent farmer and man of business, kindly well-to-do Mr. Shepherd, was not intimately acquainted with the details of his country's laws. They and the entire village would have accepted his decision upon any of them with respect.

It happened that Jesse Williams senior had changed his barge that summer, so he never came to Oxford. It took some little time to ascertain that he was not coming, and why. Then Annie—for Jesse was no scholar—wrote letters from time to time to different places on the Leamington and Rugby Canal, where it was supposed they would find him. Early in January they got this answer :

‘Jesse Williams sez young Jess and his gurl are 2 fools. If they doont like it they may lump it. He doont see wy he shoud consent to there gettin marrid.—Signed—Jesse Williams, His Mark.’

This had been an agreeable and unexpected opportunity for the exercise of power to the drunken bargee, who had years before been deprived of the custody of his son. Annie wrote again, but received no further reply.

This postponement of their marriage was a great blow to her ; truth to tell, it did not much affect Jess. Of course he should marry her next year, as soon as he was twenty-one ; and as long as they were married some time, the exact period seemed to him a detail. There were several couples in the village who had had children before they were man and wife, but once married no one troubled to rake that up against them, unless it was in the heat of a quarrel about something else. He was far too happy in the possession of Annie and a home of his own to worry himself over trifles. But Annie came from a higher social stratum, where morals are less careless. As the shock and excitement of her first leaving the farm wore off, the instinct of respectability in her asserted itself more and more. The irregularity of her position branded her, in her own eyes, with a shame that marriage itself could not wholly obliterate ; yet she intensely desired to be married. At first it seemed a matter of days ; then it went further and further away, till at last it was too far off to form part of the tangible

future. At any rate her child must be born before, and the thought was bitter to her. Mr. Pontin himself could scarcely feel more keenly than she the disgrace she had brought upon her family.

Meantime, as the winter wore on, the faces of James Pontin and his wife got to look harder, older, and more withered. They could not forget the scandal about Annie, for she was at their door ; and, what affected them even more, they heard that Benny had enlisted at the Cowley barracks, and then that he was going to Egypt. They waited and waited for him to write or come, but nothing happened ; then uncle went to the barracks and found he had sailed from Portsmouth two days before. This was all the news of Benny.

It must not be supposed because Annie was not happy that she did not love Jesse. She had not been carried into his arms by one of those deep tides of passion which sweep smooth over all obstacles, submerging the ordinary features of life and character as a great flood submerges those of a landscape.

But she loved him in spite of, partly because of, an acute sensitiveness to the roughness of her lot. She attached herself to him with the affection of the civilised being, and with the clinging dependence of the savage woman on the man who holds her fate in his hands. Jesse's great love for her could not transmute his natural stupidity, and he did not perceive that she was unhappy. Indeed she was not so when he came home and they sat close together by the fire, he smoking or mending harness, and she with her needle. His wages were low, but they kept them in the necessities of life. The improvidence of the very poor has its bright side. Life would indeed be intolerable were they always contemplating the gulf of destitution on whose brink they hang. But Annie belonged to a provident family, and could not as yet acquire their happy thoughtlessness. Her father's savings and club-money had lasted them nearly to the end of his illness, and he had fretted a great deal when they were gone. She, as the weekly wage went in rent and food and fuel, wondered how she would be able to

prepare for the baby's advent and replace their own clothes, which even the neatest mending would not make everlasting. Aunt had sent her her own few possessions by the hands of Abel. She could not bear to be idle so much of the day while Jesse was working hard, but she was wholly unfit for field-labour, and she could get no needle-work in High Cross, because there were no gentry there, and she was not intimate enough with the villagers to get those odd jobs which are given away among friends. There was, however, one person who from time to time asked her in to do a bit of mangling. This was Mrs. Baker, the Vicarage washerwoman. Mrs. Baker was a plump, pink-complexioned woman, as good-natured as is possible for a very talkative person who would rather say anything than nothing. A few out of her innumerable words had lately given offence to the lady who owned the village mangle, who had retorted by mentioning episodes in Mrs. Baker's early career which she herself commonly forgot. The village had allowed her to forget them, for as regards women the

social code of the poor is usually both more reasonable and more Christian than ours. Having routed the lady of the mangle from a business point of view by getting a machine of her own, Mrs. Baker was not sorry when she required help to employ a person of no obtrusive respectability. Nor, to do her justice, was she sorry to hold out a hand to the girl—a hand rough but friendly, and as helpful as was allowed by the pressure of her own necessities and the severe supervision of her eldest daughter, who was laundry-maid in a ‘good’ house in the neighbourhood, and particular about her company. Mrs. Barker’s interest in Annie’s affairs was, if possible, livelier than in that of her neighbours in general. She was never tired of her own remarks about them, which, though always well meant, were often exasperating.

‘Have Williams said anything more about marrying you, my dear?’ she would ask, while Annie was turning the mangle.

‘No,’ answered Annie, with determined indifference. ‘It’s no good his talking about it till he can do it.’

Mrs. Baker shook her head.

‘Well, well! if I was you I should feel a deal more comfortable if he talked about it a bit, over his glass, or o’ Sundays, as it might be. I likes to know what’s in folk’s minds, and whose to tell you if they don’t themselves? It ain’t as if you could put any dependence on men—they’re a shifty lot, that they are, my dear; and so you’ll say when you knows ’em. Why, my darter was telling me only yesterday what doings there’ve been down at her place. The footman, as has been engaged to the housekeeper ever since he was in buttons, give warning, and is going to marry the kitching-maid. Lor! ain’t they false!’

Annie seemed strangely unmoved by this instance of male perfidy, which sent such a thrill of exhilarating horror through Mrs. Baker’s susceptible bosom. She only said stubbornly, ‘Jesse isn’t one to talk, and he isn’t one to change his mind neither.’ And pausing and blushing a little—‘Then he’s that fond of me he’d do whatever I asked him.’

The washerwoman folded Mr. Hayes’ broad

white choker and drew her iron slowly and steadily along it. As she got near the end of it she said :

‘ Bless you, that’s what girls always think o’ the first. You gets to know ’em after a bit.’

‘ Mrs. Baker !’ cried Annie, ‘ don’t you nor any one else go talking as though Jesse didn’t want to marry me. It’s shameful untrue, and I won’t hear a word more about it.’

Mrs. Baker looked up half amused and wholly surprised.

‘ Deary me, Annie Pontin, what a sperrit you’ve got ! You’re just for all the world like me when I was a girl—such a sperrit as I had ! I’m sure I hope Williams *do* mean honest by you ; he seems a steady young chap, and one as would act right. As to his being so fond, don’t you reckon on that. It’s their natur to begin fond, and it’s their natur to wear it off ; but you needn’t fret about it, for most like by that time he’ll be used to your ways and won’t trouble to change—that is, if you don’t give him words. He’s but a lad yet, and he’s bound to be like the rest of ’em. There’ll be times when he’ll take his

drop too much, and times when there's no pleasing his stomach, and lucky if it's no worse. But just you take my advice—don't you give him no words, and you'll get him to church yet.'

Thus did Mrs. Baker, no wiser than her fellow-mortals, pronounce judgment on half the human race from the poor premisses of her own span-wide experience.

Happily for Annie she trusted to her own knowledge of Jesse rather than to the washer-woman's knowledge of the world. Yet though she had no doubt as to his intentions, it was galling to find that other people had ; especially to a Pontin, who liked to hold her head high.

'Jesse,' she said one Sunday evening, 'I don't mean to talk to any one again, not till we're married.'

Jesse removed his pipe from his mouth, which gradually expanded into a broad smile. He still took a lover's pleasure in everything she said and looked, and there was something amusingly childish about the air of haughty decision with which she lifted

her chin and deposited a tea-cup on the dresser as she made this announcement.

‘Lor, Annie!’ he ejaculated.

‘I don’t mean exactly as I shan’t speak,’ she went on, putting the things on the shelf with quick deft motions; ‘of course I must buy what we want and that. But I shan’t go talking to them women over at Mrs. Baker’s any more, Mrs. Pike and Mrs. Clinker and such like; nor Mrs. Baker more than I can help.’

‘I should ha’ thought you’d ha’ liked a bit of a chat,’ returned Jess; ‘the women-folk they mostly does. But if you likes to keep yourself to yourself, all the better, says I, all the better.’

Annie put her arms round his neck, and he looked up at her with his bright face.

‘I shouldn’t mind if I never set eyes on any one but you,’ she said, and kissed him once or twice. And then—‘You *are* good and kind to me, Jess, and I don’t believe you’ll get different. The others they know nothing about you, and they’re always pretending they know a lot more than I do.’

‘Why, what *can* they know about me more nor every one knows?’ asked Jesse bewildered. ‘Let alone the work’us, I’ve kep’ myself as respectable as other folks, and respectabler nor some.’ As he thought it over he became as nearly as possible indignant. ‘What ha’ they been telling you about *me*, I’d like to know?’ he reiterated.

‘They say,’ Annie answered, ‘I’m not to fancy you’ll keep on being fond of me. Men are always like that for a bit, they say; and they want me to think maybe you won’t marry me after all, not unless I take a deal of trouble to make you.’

Jesse ruminated silently for a minute or two, chuckled, and gradually broke into a loud laugh. He drew Annie’s head down and gave her a smacking kiss on the ear.

‘By Jinger, my dear,’ he said, ‘you did give me a start! I was afeard there was some one casting about to get me into trouble with the master. Lor, Annie! whatever made you listen to their nonsense? I never thought you was such a silly.’

Annie smiled and blushed, and wondered

why she had. Then she kneeled down on the floor in front of the fire and put her hand in Jesse's. He kept on looking at her silently, while the red firelight brightened the gold in her hair and the soft roses in her cheeks ; then he laughed again.

So they sat by the fire and could well afford to make merry at the expense of their neighbours, who had gone so much further along the dull road of life and found nothing as sweet by the way—had gathered nothing more valuable on their journey than the sterile dust miscalled 'knowledge of the world.'

The sixpences Annie earned at Mrs. Baker's were too occasional to make a sensible difference in their income, and one day she thought of a plan for getting work in Oxford. When the dirty February snow had melted from under the hedges, and small and foolish prim-roses were sunning themselves in the open places of the coppice, she set off to Horsley with a little money in her pocket, which she had saved out of the fuel since the weather had been warmer. She brought back with her a bit of Turkey red and some white thread,

and by the next evening had fashioned a tiny embroidered pinafore, such as had been a speciality of the school in which she had been taught. She put her best work into it, and felt very happy as she stitched away, remembering how popular these little garments had been with the ladies who visited the school from time to time. When it was done she spent some ill-spared pence in a ride to Oxford. If on arriving there she had taken it to the villas of the suburbs she would have found more than one customer for her work ; but going from door to door was too like begging. So she went to the shopkeepers ; and shopkeepers, especially provincial ones, are slow to believe that their customers can affect any fashion which does not purport to come from Paris. The girl worked well, but she could give no references as to character ; and as to the pinafore, they could not picture any ladylike woman of their acquaintance shrouding the charms of her light-ringleted plaid-sashed infant in such an unusual garment. They all gave Annie very plainly to understand that they did not admire her pinafore or wish to

see her again. So she jogged drearily home in the market cart, with the little parcel in her lap. It was summer before she again tried for work, and this time a greater misfortune befell. She heard that a farmer's daughter some miles away was going to be married, and that if she went off at once she might get some of the trousseau to make. She started off after tea one day, and returned unsuccessful, late in the evening.

Jesse had been helping to stack hay in the hot sun all the afternoon, and after that had watered the horses in one of the deep fish-ponds at the Hall. A young horse, pleased to disport himself in the cool water after straining and sweating so many hours in the heavy hay-waggon, left the decorous ranks of his elders, where they stood soberly drinking and stirring up the mud at the edge, and plunged into the pond breast-high, sucking down great delicious draughts of dark water from under the broad leaves and silver cups of the trembling water-lilies. Not only so, but when the others shuffled dripping up to the farm-yard, slow and contented, this inso-

lent and ill-regulated young horse continued to stand in the middle of the pond, deaf to the exhortations of Jesse and out of reach of his long whip ; whereupon Jesse plunged into the water and drove him out, splashing and snorting, to receive the due chastisement of his sins. However, in the long run it was the man who suffered most. When his work was finished he went home, and finding Annie not yet returned, lay down to rest thinking she would be back presently to get supper ; but before she got back, his clothes, all wet from the pond, had dried upon him. Next morning his limbs ached and his head was heavy, but he worked in the hayfield till the evening, when Mr. Shepherd was giving a supper to all the farm hands. He sat down to supper with the rest, but everything swam round him, and he felt as though his arms and legs had red-hot iron bars in them instead of bones. He could not eat, and presently he slunk off and home to Annie. Next day he was in bed ; a whole fortnight passed, and he was still in bed. They were getting into debt at the village shop, and the doctor held out no

hopes of his being able to return to his work for another six weeks. He was no longer in violent pain, but lay quiet most of the time, while Annie sat by him thinking about the bill at the shop, and the baby coming into a world where it would find nothing to clothe it but a scarlet cotton pinafore.

Mrs. Baker looked in sometimes, but she had a child down with the measles, and there also happened to be some particularly interesting bits of gossip afloat in the village just then, which tended to put the Williamses and their affairs out of her head. Mr. Shepherd came once to inquire, and sent every few days ; otherwise they saw no one except Mr. Evans, the parish doctor. Mr. Evans was a dapper little man with a pleasant young face, a fair moustache and an unprofessional manner, which he spasmodically attempted to tone down when sent by his partner to the more important patients. He rode a sprightly little mare, as well-groomed as himself, and spent some of the most anxious moments of his day in giving instructions concerning her welfare to the odd boys in whose care he

was obliged to leave her while he was with his patients. He was a clever, kind-hearted young fellow, and Annie was always glad when she heard his horse stop at the door, and his quick step come springing up the crazy stairs of the summer-house. He called her Mrs. Williams, and did not seem to notice she was not married.

‘Come, Williams, you’re getting on famously,’ he said one morning. ‘And now let’s have a look at the missus. We can’t afford to have her laid up alongside of you; the district nurse has got plenty to do without having you on her hands, and you’d find her precious disagreeable.’

A great poet used to call pudding ‘a prejudice’; there are some who would go further, and declare eating in general to be a habit. It was one of which Annie, like many another poor woman, had almost cured herself.

‘This won’t do, Mrs. Williams,’ said the doctor, shaking his head over her pulse. ‘You haven’t felt inclined for any dinner to-day, I suppose?’

‘No,’ answered Annie bravely, ignoring the shade of irony in his tone. ‘I never was very hearty, and now I don’t seem to want much but my cup of tea.’

‘Oh, confound your cups of tea!’ exclaimed the doctor. ‘You’re all alike, you women. Penny wise, pound foolish.’

Annie was not beaten.

‘It’s no good my eating what I can’t pay for, Mr. Evans; it just sticks in my throat. If I can’t be better without better food, I must be as I am.’

‘Why don’t you go to What’s-her-name—the long-nosed old lady—your parson’s wife?’ he asked. ‘I suppose she’d give you some of her soup; it’s not such bad stuff as you might think.’

Annie blushed and looked down.

‘I couldn’t, sir,’ she answered; and added, after a pause, ‘she’s not one to like people coming to her that weren’t respectable.’

Mr. Evans fidgeted.

‘Oh, bother that!’ he exclaimed hastily, turning red and cross, as though the allusion had been to something unpleasant in his own

circumstances instead of in Annie's. And the conversation having reached an embarrassing point, he cut it short by taking out his stylograph and scribbling an official note to Mrs. Hayes recommending the case. This he entrusted to Annie, with earnest if slangy exhortations to deliver it at the Parsonage, for the sake of Jesse and the little one that was coming.

As he trotted out of the village he said to himself: 'That little thing's not fit for the traces; some day she'll get too big a load behind her and break her heart. And if she does, what's the odds? Lord knows there are women enough in the world, and it's purely professional prejudice that makes a fellow bother about keeping one more or less above ground.'

The mare moved impatiently under him; he pulled up, glanced round to see that no one was looking, and disappeared over a gate into a neighbouring grass-field.

CHAPTER VI

JESSE never troubled himself much about the future, but the wolf was now actually at the door, and he was grateful for the doctor's recommendation to Mrs. Hayes ; only wondered at his own stupidity in not having thought of applying to her before. It must be acknowledged that he did not in the least shrink from becoming an object of charity. But he encouraged Annie to take her pinafore to the Vicarage to show how good a needlewoman she was, and how anxious to work. They had neither of them ever exchanged a word with the vicar or his wife, and being still very young they could not help indulging in unreasonable hopes. So on the next Saturday morning Annie, tremulous but determined, pulled at the stiff bell of the Vicarage and asked for Mrs. Hayes. She was

shown into the bare dining-room, with its worn green carpet and table-cloth. Mrs. Hayes had already been putting down names and receiving subscriptions for next winter's clothing club. All her part of the parish business was irreproachably performed, after a steely mechanical fashion. If she took rather more than her rightful share of it, it was because she intensely respected the vicar's literary leisure, and seemed to herself and him better fitted to deal with the coarse and commonplace needs of the villagers. When Annie came in she was seated at the end of the long table with a desk in front of her, and several little account books.

'Fifteen pence, one and threepence—Oh, it's you, Annie Pontin,' she said. 'Sit down and wait a minute.' And she went on bending over her accounts.

She was an elderly lady with a long bony nose and curls on whose unchanging hue she prided herself, very mistakenly, for their brownness made her gray old face look unnecessarily hard and ashen. Another lady sat at the window, fidgeting with a sewing-machine ;

as far, that is, as the word 'fidget' could be applied to anything that she did, for she was a large blonde person, who moved quietly. She was on the last border-land of youth, and the least bit inclined to be stout; her hands and firm full mouth and chin gave a pleasing impression of moral as well as physical power, as different as possible from that swaggering assumption of masculine vigour which is the latest of our feminine affectations. Annie would have said beforehand that the presence of a third person at this interview was calculated to increase her nervousness, but on the contrary, there was something comforting in being looked at by those clear, cheerful, blue eyes.

'Well, now, what have *you* come about, Annie Pontin?' asked Mrs. Hayes, closing her book and putting her spectacles into their case with a snap. 'Your marriage, I hope. Mr. Hayes has been expecting for a long time to see you or Williams up here about it.'

Her use of the vicar's name in such cases was the merest form, for as a matter of fact

he never expected, hoped, or feared anything whatever in connection with his parishioners.

Annie held up her head and made answer :

‘Yes, ma’am, and so we should have been here long ago, if Jesse had been able to marry me.’

‘And why isn’t he able? It’s a great shame for you two to be disgracing a respectable family—for I will say the Pontins are respectable, and Mr. Pontin a good church-going kind of man.’

‘Jesse’s ready and willing to marry me to-morrow, Mrs. Hayes,’ returned Annie, ‘if his father would allow him—but his father won’t give consent, and so it’s not in his power to do so.’

‘Stuff!’ said Mrs. Hayes. Then, after a pause, ‘Well, what *do* you want?’

Necessity is a hard master. Annie battled down her pride, and producing Mr. Evans’s note, answered, ‘The doctor told me to give you this, ma’am. I shouldn’t have come only that Jesse is so bad. He’s been ill more than a fortnight, and Mr. Evans says it will be weeks before he’s about again.’

Mr. Shepherd's very kind, but of course it can't be expected as he can pay Jesse full wages and another man to do his work besides. So—so that's how it is,' she ended, rather vaguely.

Mrs. Hayes had put on her spectacles and was reading the doctor's note.

'There's some soup nearly ready now,' she said ; 'you'd better wait for it.'

Annie with trembling fingers undid the parcel which contained her pinafore.

'I've took the liberty of bringing you this I've made,' she said, 'just to show as I can do needlework. Teacher at our Board school she reckoned me the best worker there, and it do seem a pity I can't earn anything by it.'

'So you're a Board school girl, are you?' asked Mrs. Hayes drily. 'Well, I'm not surprised. You hear that, Mary,' she added, turning to the blonde lady, 'this is one of your educated young women.'

'If it hadn't been for Jesse's illness,' Annie went on, too anxious to notice the sarcasm, 'I shouldn't have ventured to trouble you, Mrs. Hayes ; but I thought considering that

you mightn't object to recommending me for any little job you heard of.'

Mrs. Hayes turned the pinafore over and sniffed. 'The work's very fair, certainly. I don't pretend to understand what young ladies like nowadays, but I dare say it would please them—it's queer enough. However, that's neither here nor there. I'm an old-fashioned person, and never put out my own needlework ; and as to recommending you, Annie Pontin, how can I tell you and Williams get married? It's nonsense to talk of it, when you know there are plenty of respectable women in the village who would be glad enough to earn a shilling. Now just wait a minute, while I see if there's any soup for Williams ; no one in our parish need go without soup when they are ill.'

She went out by a side door, leaving Annie tingling. Perhaps even the thought of Jesse lying weak and suffering at home would not have induced her to wait till Mrs. Hayes and her soup came back, if the dock had not fortunately been growing near the nettle.

'May I look at your pinafore?' asked the

lady Mrs. Hayes had addressed as Mary, in a clear pleasant voice.

Annie handed it to her.

‘It’s very pretty,’ she said. ‘May I buy it?’

‘It would be very kind of you, miss,’ Annie returned, flushing more with pleasure than she had done with pride and shame.

‘Not at all,’ said Mary. ‘It will just suit a little niece of mine. I never saw one like it before.’

Then she asked if Annie understood a sewing-machine as well as sewing. Her London schoolmistress had made much of the girl, and taught her this extra accomplishment; so when Mrs. Hayes returned to announce that the soup would not be ready for an hour or two, she found her niece and Annie Pontin stooping together over the no longer recalcitrant machine.

‘That girl interests me, Aunt Agnes,’ Mary observed, when Annie had gone.

‘Of course,’ returned Mrs. Hayes; ‘she is disreputable. Personally I prefer them respectable—but I am old-fashioned, which must excuse my want of taste.’

‘You shouldn’t be always telling us that,’ said Mary, with her hearty laugh. ‘It’s unfair on a past generation.’

In the course of much hospital experience Mary had acquired a certain knack of dealing with men and women of various character. She knew it is sometimes well to be rude to rude people ; like animals, they are apt to be cowed by their own reflections. Mrs. Hayes reddened, was silent a minute, and then said her niece was an odd girl, and that she owned she did not understand the young people nowadays. After which she answered all Mary’s inquiries about Annie, with unusual fulness and courtesy. She gave her the version of the Pontin scandal which was current in the village ; but Mrs. Hayes’s dislike of Mrs. Pontin, coupled with her natural shrewdness, made her add the expression of her conviction that the girl’s aunt had been at the bottom of the affair—a conviction which somehow in no wise modified her condemnation of Annie. Like James Pontin, she attached importance to facts rather than to their explanation.

That afternoon the sun threw the shadow of Mary's tall substantial figure on the small door in the Manor wall, under the crooked date and twisted monogram of its Elizabethan lord. When the door opened, her own bright look seemed reflected in Annie's face.

'I brought you the soup myself,' she said, 'because I wanted to pay you for the pinafore ; and besides I am a hospital nurse, you know, and I thought I might be able to help you with your patient.'

It was wonderful how Mary's mere presence gave people weighed down with work and responsibility, a sense as of a burden being lifted off their shoulders. Even the shy Jess did not mind being moved about and having his toilette made by her strong, gentle, skilful hands. He soon looked forward to her coming, and greeted her with his very best smile ; a smile that brightened up his heavy face wonderfully. This kind of help it was in her character and training to give, and circumstances enabled her to add some of a different nature. In a month she was to sail for India, to take the head of

a large hospital there, and she had been so occupied that she had had little time to prepare an outfit. She had meant to spend her time at High Cross in making herself a supply of under-linen ; but it was long since she had done any needlework, and she found it more difficult and irksome than she had anticipated. She was really delighted to put her materials into Annie's more experienced hands. Then for Annie there were no more dismal thoughts about the debt at the shop, and even the baby-clothes began to come under the head of possibilities.

'Would you like me to stay with Jesse this evening, while you go to church ?' asked Mary one Sunday afternoon, putting her head into the lower room of the summer-house.

'Thank you, Nurse Mary, I don't think I shall be going,' Annie answered.

Mary was not a preacher, but she had her views.

'Oh, I wish you would !' she said.

'You see, nurse,' Annie explained, hanging her head, 'I don't like to go—not till Jesse and me are married.'

Mary hesitated a moment, then :

‘Why don’t you get married?’ she asked.

‘Because Jesse’s father’s against it,’ replied Annie. ‘We’ve written times and times, but he’s a hard-hearted man as likes to make other folks miserable; and Mr. Shepherd says that being under age, we can’t be married without our parents’ consent.’

‘If that’s the case, it is certainly very unfortunate,’ said Mary meditatively. ‘I don’t know what the law is, but perhaps Mr. Shepherd is mistaken about it.’

To Annie this supposition appeared highly improbable, and she did not even mention it to Jess.

On the Tuesday morning Nurse Mary, having sent Annie down to the sewing-machine, and got Jesse into his chair by the window, seated herself at his side.

‘Jesse Williams,’ she said gravely, ‘will you answer me truthfully if I ask you a very important question?’

Jesse was a little startled by the solemnity of this address, but after a bit he replied :

‘You ask away, miss, and I’ll answer you as well as I know how.’

‘Well, is there really nothing to prevent your marrying Annie, except your father’s refusal of his consent?’

‘To be sure there’s not,’ he returned, ‘nothing at all. Why, miss, you don’t mean to say as you’ve got round father?’ And he looked at her with admiring awe.

She laughed.

‘I haven’t tried, for it’s not worth while. Yesterday I went to a lawyer in Oxford, and he told me it’s all a mistake to fancy you want your father’s consent. Any boy over sixteen can legally marry without asking any one’s leave.’

Some minutes of gaping incredulity on Jesse’s part followed Mary’s exposition of the law; at last he began to allow there might be something in it, and eventually:

‘Maybe the lawyer’s right,’ he said. ‘But it *is* a queer start. To think as Mr. Shepherd told me wrong! But how do you know as the lawyer’s right?’

Then he ran as well as he was able to the

top of the stairs, shouting, 'Annie! Annie! make haste here.'

She came up quite frightened, to see what was the matter. Mary and Jesse both told her at once. For a minute or two she could hardly take it in, but stood staring from one to the other. Then her blue child-like eyes filled with tears; she went up to Mary, and taking her hands, looked in her face.

'I don't believe you're a lady,' she said; 'I believe you're an angel.'

Mary kissed her and put her arms round her; Annie laid her head on the nurse's soft shoulder, and Mary thought she was crying quietly. A few tears ran down her own cheeks, and fell on the young creature's bright hair.

CHAPTER VII

THE successes of benevolence are as intoxicating as other successes. Even Mary, who, whatever the Williamses might think about it, was a mortal, could not escape their effects. Not content with having been able to do them one real service, she wanted to be altogether the Good Fairy—to smooth away every difficulty from their path, till at the end of the story it should be written, not only ‘So they were married,’ but also ‘and they lived happily ever after.’

Providing herself with a commission from the Vicarage to purchase a couple of fowls, she set out one afternoon for Pontin’s farm. She had only knocked twice at the iron-studded door when aunt appeared.

‘And lucky you was too, miss,’ she observed, while she was superfluously dusting

a chair in the parlour. 'For our Benny he always said you might as well rap at a tombstone as at this here door. He was one of your funny ones was Benny, poor fellow—him as is gone among the blacks.'

Mrs. Pontin knew the vicar's niece by sight, but Mary did not know her. She had expected to find her a much more formidable person, especially as she gathered that words had passed between Mrs. Hayes and Mrs. Pontin, and was not aware that the latter had a short memory for quarrels, and was always respectful, if independent, with the gentry. She was neither a democrat nor a dissenter, and quite recognised the right of the Vicarage to interfere with her in matters of indifference. But it was ill talking in the best parlour, bolt upright on a horsehair chair, and fixed by the glassy stare of the stuffed animals. The dog, mangy and white, that had been aunt's ; the overgrown rabbit, the squirrel, the guinea-pigs and ferrets once beloved of Ben ; the fox that had been killed by the cross, and whose head grinned venge-

fully down from between two tails of uncertain origin.

From Mrs. Hayes' order, Mary found it a little difficult to pass to the subject of Annie. She began to talk about the setting of eggs and the rearing of poultry in general, and at last invented some business in connection with these to bring her there another day. On this occasion Mrs. Pontin took her out into the stackyard, where some fowls were scratching which were supposed to reflect particular credit on the establishment. The door of the big barn stood open, and in a corner among swathes of hay was dimly visible the solemn profile of the old turkey hen ; the very same who had been the cause of so much agitation in the family.

'Have you many turkeys this year?' asked Mary.

It was a harmless question, yet she felt excited as she put it, for it was the first move in her game.

'Well, to be sure, there's a good few,' replied Mrs. Pontin, admitting as much as could reasonably be expected. 'The old

hen there, she don't lay many eggs herself, but she do hatch 'em like clockwork. I *was* in a taking last year when I thought she was lost.'

'Did she stray?' asked Mary.

'Stray you may call it,' returned Mrs. Pontin. 'She was let loose. She came back as pitiful a figure as ever you see, poor thing—half of her tail-feathers gone and two of her chicks.'

'Then it wasn't so bad as you thought,' said Mary; and continued at a venture—'Altogether I hope things were not as bad as you thought, Mrs. Pontin. Do you know the vicar is going to put up Annie's banns next Sunday?'

'And time too, according to what I hear,' answered aunt. She spoke without bitterness—with indifference. Events had in her own eyes and in those of her acquaintance justified her opinion of Annie, and even her behaviour to the girl; and, freed from the irritation of her daily companionship, aunt had forgotten her wrath, if not her dislike. It was not Annie's misconduct which had puckered Mrs.

Pontin's forehead and brought the lines round her mouth.

'I have seen a good deal of Jesse Williams and your niece,' Mary went on, 'and I feel sure when they are once married you need not be afraid of their disgracing you again in any way. Other people will forget the past—and oh, Mrs. Pontin, I do hope you and her uncle will too!'

'*I* shouldn't be against seeing her after she's married,' returned aunt condescendingly; 'not if she come humble-like and asking our pardon and saying as how we'd acted right towards her, her uncle and me. But she won't, miss—not she! They're all of a brood, them Pontins, and it ain't in 'em; they're as obstinate as they can stick. I know Pontin he is; and if she did come I can't undertake what he'd do.'

'I expect he would do whatever you thought right,' said Mary, hopeful and flattering.

Mrs. Pontin's mouth tightened.

'Don't you go for to say that, miss, when Benny he's out among the blacks. It ain't me as has druv' him there. And uncle, as

kep' putting off and putting off going to the Barricks, when I says to him again and again —“ He's there, as sure as the nose is on your face.””

Mary had now touched the really sensitive point. It was true that Mrs. Pontin had urged her husband to go to the Barracks several times before he had gone, and that by this delay he had missed seeing Benny. Aunt had not been sparing of her reproaches. It was then that an illusion which had long been incubating in her mind broke the shell. She convinced herself that there had never been a serious difference between herself and Ben ; uncle's harshness had been the sole cause of his leaving home. The amicable business-partnership under the form of marriage which the Pontins had been carrying on for fourteen years was now seriously disturbed, though not on its practical side. She became more irritable and he less enduring. James Pontin was not given to tracing things to their source, and he did not definitely tell himself that his troubles were due to his having done his duty by his relations. He

only said folks were all alike ; there was no good to be got by being kind to them, and a man did best to mind his own business. The labourers in his fields noticed he grew closer-fisted and rougher-tongued.

Once on the subject of Ben, Mrs. Pontin went on. In vain did Mary make cunning little attempts to draw her back to the Williamses and their affairs. Benny's history, as seen from the newest point of view, must all be told, and the old story of Kite and her marriage with Pontin ; but now the commentary ran somewhat differently.

'I'm sure I never should ha' married him if I'd thought he'd ha' been so cruel to Benny, poor boy.'

At last she paused. James Pontin was opening the gate leading from the orchard to the stackyard.

Mary had often seen him in church ; a tallish man, better built than most of his class, and with a way of carrying his head and a direct look that made him almost imposing. He lifted his straw hat and stopped by the two women.

'The lady was a-telling me as Jesse Williams and our Annie are to be asked in church next Sunday,' aunt observed.

He looked at her sternly for a moment, and then, with a studied indifference, very unlike her own real indifference, replied :

'Maybe—it ain't no concern o' yours, or mine either !' And turning to Mary : 'Will you please to tell Mr. Hayes, miss, as I can send my man to mow the churchyard to-morrow ? He sent and ask me about it.'

'Miss was a-saying,' Mrs. Pontin went on calmly, 'as she hoped we'd see 'em again when they was got respectable.'

There was a pause, while Mr. Pontin slowly turned a lowering brow from Mary to his wife and back again.

'Did *she* want you to come here ?' he asked.

'Who ? Annie ?' returned Mary, somewhat confused. 'No, she said nothing about it ; she doesn't know. It was only that I—I was just talking to Mrs. Pontin.'

'Well, I can excuse your mentioning it,' he answered, with a kind of haughty respectfulness, 'considerin' you're a stranger in these

parts, young lady. But the girl, she knows my mind, and so do the neighbours too. She's no kin of mine, and it's my partickler request that no one shall talk of her as though she was.'

He lifted his hat again and went indoors. 'There, miss, you see it ain't no use talking to him,' said Mrs. Pontin philosophically, clearing the last remains of the meal out of her pan with a stick; 'and I don't know as he's so fur wrong. Selina—that's Annie's mother—she always was a bad 'un, and black cats mostly has black kits. Folks talk a deal about "turning over a new leaf," and maybe they does it now and again; but lor! if you've got a dog as has worried a sheep, or a hen as has tasted an egg, you can't be comfortable in your mind about 'em just because they're lying quiet for a bit. You must excuse my talking of the dumb animals, miss, but they ain't so different from Christians, that they ain't—leastways from them as ain't gentry.'

The word Christian suggested to Mary a reference to the Prodigal Son. Mrs. Pontin might have answered that we have no infor-

mation as to the subsequent career of that individual, but the mention of him only took her back to the subject of Benny, from which she was not again to be distracted.

Mary was discouraged and rather humiliated by the failure of her little attempt to patch up a peace, and said nothing about it to Jesse or Annie. It was not many days after this that she left High Cross. The Horsley fly came crawling up the hill to fetch her ; and as she passed the Manor on her way to the station she stopped it to say a last good-bye to Jesse and Annie, who were waiting at the door in the wall. She jumped out, laden with her parting presents ; a bundle of calico and flannel for Annie, and for him a sealed packet with the superscription—*To buy the ring*. The farewells were warm but hurried. They called out more thanks, more good wishes as she drove away, and putting her head out of the rattling window, she saw them for the last time as they stood by the old stone doorway in the sunshine—Annie's bright head, and Jesse, long and still lean from his illness, waving a red cotton handkerchief.

CHAPTER VIII

THE young couple for whom she had done so much were sad at parting with her, yet that sadness could not take away the happiness she had brought to them. There was a peaceful look on Annie's face and a girlish gaiety about her such as Jesse had not seen since they sat on the garden wall together. For his part he enjoyed the holyday of his convalescence. It was summer weather, rich in sun, and perhaps unconsciously their mood was influenced by the general beauty and joyousness of the world about them. That, however, would hardly have consoled them if their material affairs had not been progressing; but Annie had earned enough to cover their expenses, and by the time they had been 'asked' three Sundays in church Jesse was to all appearance well, and doing his work at

Mr. Shepherd's again. But the day before they were to be married, he was able to get away by train, to buy the ring in Oxford. Annie had promised to meet him on the field path that leads from the station to High Cross. As she was walking on the Horsley road, along the back of the ridge, Abel, Mr. Pontin's labourer, passed her, jogging along in an empty cart. Abel had his own reasons for taking sides against Mrs. Pontin, and would always have been friendly with Annie, if she had given him the chance.

'D'ye want a lift to Horsley?' he shouted.

Annie shook her head.

'Thank you, I shan't go no further than the windmill,' she answered ; and he jolted on.

The field path went off from the road over a kind of buttress of hill, where the gorse grew and a windmill was slowly turning in the breeze. Annie sat down at the edge of the slope. The corn-fields below looked very golden, and the distant hills very blue beyond the great dark sails of the mill and its tumbledown substructure, patched here and there with scarlet tiles. Far and wide the

red wheat and the yellow and the feathery barley were ripening in the August sun. A fleeting glory rested even on the great dreary field with the great dreary workhouse in the middle. Annie almost smiled as her eyes fell on it, to think how Jess would not even look that way, and how often he used to say she ought not to fret if her child *was* born out of wedlock, so long as it hadn't got to go to the workhouse. The thought of that possibility she knew would be enough to keep him steady and industrious, if ever he were tempted to be otherwise. She could also see the Horsley station, which stood a little out of the village. A short train was coming slowly along the line from Oxford ; Jesse must be in that. Just then the gate into the road creaked, she turned round and saw the idiot coming through. A course of cuffs and kicks from Jesse had cured Albert of coming to the Manor, and she had not seen him for some time. He was dirtier and even more nauseous in appearance than he had been a year before ; Annie could not bear to look at him, and fixed her eyes on the station, behind

which the train was disappearing. He, however, had no intention of being ignored. He crawled up on his stomach, and putting his chin on her knee, peered into her face with his one eye. Then he opened his mouth wide, to show her a whole green apple inside before he began crunching it noisily. There was nothing dangerous or unfriendly about him, nor would the average inhabitant of High Cross have found him disgusting; but Annie, unfortunately, was of a nervous temperament.

‘Get away, Albert,’ she cried, ‘or Jess will be after you.’

He looked up with a cunning leer.

‘Not here—Jess,’ he said, in a thick slow voice.

She did not know he had made an advance in his talking of late, and it startled her as much as though one of the pigs had answered her. Just then a heavy express came dashing along the line from London, its white pennon streaming behind it, and tore through the station with a scream. Albert started up, and pointing at it waved his ragged cap,

dancing, shouting, and laughing all together. When it had passed through it slackened speed suddenly, and then stopped. The idiot ran off down the path to get a nearer view of the train, while Annie, thankful to be rid of him, sat idly watching several dark figures pass to and fro between the express and the station, which was half masked by a grove of trees. After some delay the express went on. Albert, however, did not return, for he had found a dead and torn rabbit among the gorse, and was busy completing its dissection. The country was very quiet; the shadows of the hedgerow elms were stealing out across the corn-fields, the far-off hills were growing more mistily purple, the sails of the mill had stopped turning. She got up and looked down the path, but saw no one coming; only half-way down the hill the figure of Albert, stooping over something. Presently she heard the noise of a cart rattling along the Horsley road. It was coming so fast and wild she would have thought it was a runaway, had she not distinguished a long way off the screaming of

the driver to the horse, and the lashing and cracking of his whip. She turned and sauntered to the gate, with the faint yet alert curiosity of one who is idly waiting. When the cart reached the gate, the driver pulled up the horse so savagely it almost fell on its haunches. It was a farm-bred beast, not built for fast going, and it stood there with its neck stretched out, panting, and covered with dust and sweat. She saw to her surprise that it was her uncle's cart, with Abel in it. The young fellow's hat was pushed to the back of his head, and he looked strange and excited.

'Annie! Annie Pontin!' he called out at the top of his voice, though she was only a few yards away from him.

She came through the gate.

'Get up, quick! quick!' he cried.

'What's the matter, Abel?' she asked, frightened at his look and manner.

'Don't you stop to ask that, my dear,' he answered, holding up his hand in a wild kind of way. 'Scramble in sharp, I say, and I'll have you down at the station in a jiffy.'

She got up by the wheel as fast as she could, he pulling her in by the shoulders. Then turning the horse, he lashed it on again, and away they went, racing and rattling along the straight road to Horsley.

‘Do tell me what’s the matter, Abel?’ she entreated.

‘I said as I wouldn’t,’ he answered, looking away.

‘Has anything happened to uncle?’ she asked.

He shook his head. She was conscious at the same moment of feeling that it would have been a relief to her if the answer had been ‘Yes,’ and of blaming herself for feeling so.

‘Is it Jess?’ she asked. ‘Has he been taken ill?’

‘He’ve not been taken ill,’ answered Abel shortly.

They had begun to go down the long hill into Horsley, and Abel, though he was usually pretty cautious, kept on lashing the horse, standing upright in the front of the cart, momentarily in danger of being pitched out on his head among the rolling flints.

There was something in the tone of his reply which made the words unsatisfactory. Annie wrung her hands nervously.

‘Has he had an accident?’ she asked.

Abel frowned straight in front of him, and went on driving the horse.

‘Abel!’ she cried once or twice, ‘Abel!’ but he took no notice.

At last she seized him by the coat.

‘Tell me what’s the matter, Abel, tell me directly.’

He turned round and began to swear. He was a temperance man not given to the use of bad language, but never had Jesse Williams senior himself rapped out a bigger volley of oaths. It startled Annie, especially because he did not look as though he were angry, only very pale and queer, with a twitch about his mouth.

‘If you must know, you must,’ he said, when he had done swearing—‘Williams have been run over by the train. He went to cross the line and the express knocked him down. Now don’t take on, Annie Pontin, don’t take on!’

But she was not taking on. She had been full of poignant anxiety up till then ; now the blow had fallen it was as though a bullet had hit her in a vital part and she felt no pain. Only everything had suddenly become very unreal, and when she fancied she was asking 'Is he dead?' she was only moving her lips.

'It was a lucky thing as I happened to come to the station,' Abel went on, relieved to find she was not making a scene, 'else no one would have known where you was.'

'Is he dead?' she asked again, this time in a real voice.

'No,' answered Abel, 'but he's badly hurt.'

He either could not or would not tell her anything more, and she felt in suspense again by the time they reached the station. The station-master, a stalwart, bearded man of the railway type, stood outside talking to the young porter who was his sole subordinate. They both turned very grave faces to the cart as it drove up.

- 'This is the young woman, sir,' said Abel.

‘Ah!’ returned the station-master, helping her down carefully, ‘you’ve not come much too soon.’

He put his hand on Annie’s shoulder and took her through a small gate onto the railway, beyond the station. A man was scattering cinders between the platforms; on each side she saw the stretch of steel lines, flashing in the evening sun.

‘It’s a sad business, a terrible business—but you must be a brave girl, my dear,’ said the station-master. He stopped, with a lump in his throat. It had been bad enough when he was expecting some stout coarse country wench to arrive, but to have this delicate-looking young girl, evidently just about to become a mother, appearing on such a scene was horrible. ‘You see,’ the station-master went on, as they walked up the slope to the opposite platform, ‘the slow train was just starting when he stepped behind it to get across the line, so he didn’t notice the express coming. Now you must expect to see him look terrible bad; I’m afraid he won’t know you,’ he added, with his hand on the waiting-

room door. 'Have a drink out of my flask before you go in.'

She shook her head and followed him into the room. Two men, doctors apparently, started up from the ground and hastily threw a large black tarpaulin over some instruments and bandages, and the body of a person who was lying there. They had tucked up their shirt-sleeves, but not so high as to protect them from splashes of blood, and their hands and wrists were stained a brownish red colour. It looked the worse because their white shirt fronts and black ties and coats retained the usual professional neatness and cleanliness. One of them looked at Annie and the other at the man under the tarpaulin, who was moaning with long faint regular moans ; yet, judging from his face, he was not conscious. The ashen face showed above the black tarpaulin, thrown back on a heap of leather cushions and distorted with pain and horror, the drawn lips showed the clenched teeth, and the eyelids drooped half over the fading eyes. Was this deathly mask, ghastly and strange even in the eyes of Annie, indeed the healthy

sanguine young face of her lover? She made a step or two towards him, as pale almost as he, with her arms hanging straight down by her sides and her large eyes unnaturally dilated.

‘Jesse!’ she said, in a loud whisper; but he showed no consciousness of her presence. Then she threw herself down by him on the ground, with one hand in his hair and the other on his breast, and gathering up all her strength, cried again, ‘Jesse!’—in a harsh shriek that did not seem to belong to her. There was a faint, almost imperceptible movement in his face, as though the sound had reached him; but again her voice failed her, and with her head lying close to his on the leather cushions, she said, in an agonised whisper—

‘Look, darling, look—Annie’s come.’

Just then one of the doctors, moving away a sick-looking curate who had been sitting near with a book on his knee, put a spoon between the dying man’s teeth and succeeded in getting some brandy down his throat. In a minute or two he lifted his eyelids a little

and slowly recognised Annie, who was leaning over him. She broke into incoherent tender-nesses, kissing him all over his face and hair between her words. He kept on looking at her with a painful kind of frown, as though trying to collect his thoughts. At last he said, in a slow, faint voice :

‘Ain’t it hard, Annie—oh, ain’t it hard!’ Then he moaned again and shut his eyes. The doctor poured some more brandy down him, and the next time he opened them he seemed clearer in his mind. He tried to get his hand up to his breast, but it fell back heavily on the floor. Annie was still leaning close over him, to catch his words.

‘Feel in my waistcoat pocket, quick—quick,’ he said to her.

She put the tarpaulin down from his shoulders, felt where he directed her, and brought out a small silver paper packet.

‘It’s the ring,’ he gasped. ‘Put it on—quick.’

She obeyed with trembling fingers, hardly knowing what she did, and the tears beginning to rain down on his breast.

‘No one can’t say now as I didn’t mean to make an honest woman of you,’ he went on, more distinctly; and then—‘Annie, Annie darling, what will you do when I’m gone?’

‘Don’t trouble about me, my dear,’ she sobbed. ‘But oh, Jesse, I *can’t* let you go—I *can’t* part with you. There’s no one in the world I love but you—I don’t seem to have told you that enough. You’ve been such a deal to me since father died, and now you’re going too. Oh, do try and stay with me—do try!’

He groaned, and then with an effort, speaking quite loud, said:

‘You mustn’t let my child go to the work’us, whatever you do. I’d rather a thousand times we was all dead together. Starve it, I say, sooner than send it to the work’us.’ Then his voice dropped into a murmur, ‘I should ha’ liked to——’ and died away inarticulate in a long sigh.

The doctor hurriedly put some more brandy into his mouth, but it trickled out again. Presently the doctor got up and went away.

Annie remained crouching on the ground, sometimes wiping the burning mist of tears from her eyes, and holding Jesse's hand, which was cold when she first took it, and kept growing colder. The station-master stood with his back to her, looking out of the window ; there was no one else in the room, but from the adjoining lavatory, where the doctors were washing their hands, came a subdued sound of conversation and the noise of a tap running. She sat on, waiting for Jesse to open his eyes and speak to her again. At last the elder of the two doctors came up and touched her on the shoulder.

'Come, my poor girl,' he said kindly 'you'd better not stay here any longer.'

'Are you going to move him ?' she asked, getting up ; and then, suspiciously : 'You're not going to take him to the Union ?'

'He shall be taken home, if you like,' the doctor answered ; 'but you must go on first.'

'Yes—to get things ready,' she said. 'But what if he comes to himself while I'm gone ?'

The doctor paused a minute, and then re-

plied significantly, 'He won't do that, my child.'

She turned great horror-stricken eyes, first on his face, then on Jesse's, and back again. He answered almost involuntarily aloud the dumb interrogation.

'Yes,' he said, nodding gravely, 'the poor fellow's been dead this quarter of an hour.'

Dead ! Before she had had time to realise half what that meant, a horrible sensation of nausea overwhelmed her, and the room seemed to fill with a thick darkness. Yet she stood upright and could hear the conversation round her.

'She's fainting—catch her,' said the elder to the younger doctor.

'No wonder,' said the younger, putting her down on a bench ; 'it's enough to kill her.'

There was an opening of windows and a bringing out of flasks.

When the darkness and sickness had passed away, the poignant anguish of mind had gone too ; everything seemed unreal again, as it had done when Abel first told

her of the accident. She allowed herself to be led outside, when they had promised that Jesse should soon follow. There was a group of people in the dusty space behind the station, attracted by the news of the catastrophe. The curate, who if he had weak nerves had a kind heart, had ordered the one fly Horsley could supply, and drove up in it just as Annie came out. It was an act of heroism on the part of the shy young man to shut himself in alone with her and start off on the uphill road to High Cross, but he felt it was his duty, for his rector was away, and the doctors, who had left the express, were anxious to get on by the next train. His intentions were indeed better than his performance. He was but a lad fresh from Oxford, without experience of a deeper sorrow than a plough in the Schools, and without that power of imaginative sympathy which is as much an intellectual as a moral gift. What could he say or do, brought face to face with the workings of a remorseless Fate?—Nothing, except proffer common-places about the Lord's will, like a novice in

necromancy repeating spells from the book of some great magician, whose secret he has not yet mastered, and surprised to find them of none effect. Annie did not cry ; he began to wish she would. When they reached the Manor half the village was waiting in the road, for Abel had brought the news of the accident. The curate could not help being greatly relieved when he had handed her over to a woman who stood at the door. This was Mrs. Baker. Not only had Mrs. Baker's early life been somewhat disreputable, but she had had a son killed by falling out of a cart ; a combination of circumstances which pointed her out in her own eyes and in the eyes of the village as the proper person to receive and comfort Annie. It certainly was less dreary to come into the house with a stout motherly arm round her, than in entire loneliness. Not that there was much chance of her being lonely, for the sympathy of the neighbours outside, while demonstrative and sincere, was combined with a good deal of curiosity and 'the joy of eventful living.' In justice to those who one by one

dropped into the lower room of the summer-house, it must be admitted that if Annie had been another Mrs. Baker, she would have found a certain distraction, tasted a solemn pleasure, even at this early period, in being the centre of so much tragic interest and telling her story over and over again to each fresh arrival. As it was she sat at the table with her chin on her hand, breathing every now and then a deep sigh, partly of bewildered misery, partly of physical exhaustion.

‘She won’t touch the tea as I’ve made her,’ said Mrs. Baker, addressing the little circle of matrons. ‘There, my dear, you must drink it down like medicine, you must, though I’m sure it’s as nice and sweet as can be. It’s not only yourself as you’ve got to think of, is it, Mrs. Pike?’

‘No, no,’ responded Mrs. Pike, wagging her head; ‘it’s the poor fatherless orphan of a baby as you’ve got to mind.’

And all the matrons joined in chorus, lavishing on the unborn infant more epithets of sympathy and endearment than it was likely to come by during the whole of its conscious

existence. This was followed by a chorus of approval on seeing Annie drink the tea.

‘Ah, I know what it is!’ exclaimed Mrs. Pike. ‘When that poor baby of mine died sudden—you remember, Mrs. Clinker, the one as I was waiting to have christened till I could get it a new frock—I took on that I shouldn’t have eaten a bit or a sup the whole day, if Pike hadn’t happened to be able to get me a rabbit, which he knew I was partickler fond of; and my sister Brown she cooked it for me, me not having the spirit so much as to make up the fire.’

‘Ay, I remember it very well, Mrs. Pike,’ returned Mrs. Clinker. ‘Lor, how you did take on! Now it’s an odd thing, seeing what a number of deaths there’ve been in our family, as not one of them have been sudden. But my husband and me being first cousins, and our fathers and mothers cousins beside, it’s all one family like, and they goes off mostly very gradual in a decline.’

Here Mrs. Baker took up the tale, but addressing herself more to Annie.

‘No one ’ud ever think to look at me now,

fresh-coloured and hearty, how I went on when my poor boy was took. Why, I pined pretty near to a shadder. Poor fellow! he liked his glass a bit too much maybe, but he was fond of his mammer he was, from the time he was as high as that. And there he was—jogging along down the hill, just happy like with his beer in him, when the horse slipped and pitched him out into eternity, as you may say, without a moment to prepare. They picked him up and brought him home on a shutter, but he was dead, quite dead. I never heard him speak again after he says to me, as he passed the door, "Don't wait supper for me, mother—don't wait supper for me," he says. Jesse spoke to you afore he died, didn't he, Annie?'

The eyes of the whole party riveted themselves on Annie with eager attention. They were all longing to question her, but there was something about her which made it difficult; yet she answered Mrs. Baker.

'Yes,' she said, with a little shiver.

That was all. There was a pause, each one wishing that some one else would continue

the cross-examination. Just at that moment an unexpected auxiliary appeared in the doorway ; one whom no scruples or awe of any kind would restrain from asking any questions that might occur to him. This was Mr. Solomons, the bailiff from whom, as representative of the landlord, Jesse had rented the summer-house.

He was a man with a body shaped like a swollen kind of gourd, and supported on two crooked little legs. The shape of his nose also suggested a gourd, though one of a different species, purple and drooping. A small black hat, quite new, sat jauntily on the top of his bloated face and fat red head. Mr. Solomons lived just under the hill, and had made a pretty penny by acting as bailiff to the landowner, and as horse-breeder and money-lender on his own account. He was quite a potentate in High Cross ; a condescending potentate, who loved to spend his evenings in the arm-chair at the King's Arms, drinking gin and water and holding forth to an admiring audience till he could hardly tumble into his pony-cart. It behoved him

to have the latest details of the catastrophe to retail among the pipes and glasses that evening; and who had a right to walk into the house if not himself? He went through the form of knocking on the open door with his knobby stick, and came in without waiting for an answer. Then he sat down on a chair near the door, with his double chin resting on his stick and his watery eyes fixed on Annie.

‘Well, my dear, how do you find yourself?’ he asked. ‘It’s a great trial, I’m sure—a great trial.’

Annie murmured some inaudible answer.

‘I really haven’t heard anything about it,’ he continued, ‘so I thought I’d just come round and see how you was getting on. Dear, dear! how ever did he manage to get knocked over?’

Mrs. Baker furnished the due reply. She felt a little nervous, for Annie’s sake, at the want of alacrity the girl showed to oblige Mr. Solomons. She gave him the details scrupulously, but there would have been more piquancy in getting them first hand ;

so after listening to Mrs. Baker for a bit, he turned once more to Annie.

‘So you got speech of him before he died—that was a comfort, though I don’t suppose he could say much to you, poor fellow, could he?’ He waited in vain for some response, then, catching sight of her left hand; ‘Well, you’ve got the ring, anyhow, I see; that’s a good thing. I heard some talk as he was going to marry you, but I didn’t know he’d done it.’

‘They was to have been married to-morrow, poor things,’ Mrs. Baker explained. ‘He’d been to Oxford to get the ring. That’s how it comes on her finger, I suppose.’

Annie flushed deep crimson.

‘It was his own doing, he made me put it on himself before——’ she said, and stopped short.

‘That ain’t legal, my poor girl, it ain’t legal,’ returned Mr. Solomons, slowly shaking his head. ‘You’re no more a wedded wife for that than you were yesterday. I’m very sorry for you, that I am, a pretty girl like you, but I must tell you the truth.’

Annie rose from her chair. The perpendicular lines which had come between her brows during the last hour or two deepened into a frown, and her eyes flashed. Mr. Solomons became soothing.

‘Come, come, my dear, I don’t think any the worse of you for it. I dare say he meant to do it legal, if he’d lived—I’m sure I can’t say. Any way there’s many a nice girl has made a slip to begin with, and found plenty of young fellows glad enough to take up with her all the same. Ain’t that so, Mrs. Baker?’

Mrs. Baker was silent. Mr. Solomons had chosen a rather unfortunate moment for delivering himself of this immoral sentiment. There was a momentary dispersion of the little crowd of half-grown boys and girls that had gathered round the door, and the figure of Mrs. Hayes stood on the threshold. The bailiff jumped up, and taking off his small hat with a muttered something between a greeting and an adieu, vanished with surprising alacrity as she came in. Annie was still standing at bay ; her apathetic calm had

given place to a sombre excitement. She did not seem to notice her tormentor's flight.

‘Yes, it’s my wedding-ring,’ she said, stretching out her left hand, ‘and I’ve as good a right to wear it as any one who’s been married in church. It was Jesse’s wish as I should wear it. Mrs. Hayes, you can bear me witness as everything was arranged for us to be married at nine o’clock to-morrow morning. It’s bad enough for me to be left without him ; it’s cruel if its happening to-day instead of to-morrow is to make a difference to me and my child as long as we live.’

‘Yes, it’s a great mystery, a terrible judgment,’ sighed Mrs. Hayes, as she took off her brown veil and folded it up. Her sigh was one of genuine concern, yet she could not resist the temptation to improve the occasion.

‘This ought to be a terrible warning to you High Cross girls,’ she said, turning to the whispering group at the door. ‘I grieve very much for you, Anne Pontin ; but you must remember “Whom He loveth He chasteneth,” and accept His chastisement.’

‘Perhaps I could, if it came just,’ returned Annie rebelliously. ‘But why are Jess and me to be the only ones to suffer? There’s aunt,—wasn’t she to blame? And uncle, who’s been a hard man to us? They go on living comfortable enough, and so do plenty as has done worse than we did.’

A groan of horror at this bold blasphemy went up from every one in the room except Mrs. Hayes. She was a cold woman, but she had the qualities of her defects and was reasonable, within certain limits.

‘These are mysteries we can’t undertake to explain,’ she said. ‘Still, supposing what you say about your uncle and aunt’s true, they may have been punished in some way you don’t guess. But it’s foolish to notice the girl’s talk—pray, what business have you here, all you idle folks, chattering and gaping at the poor creature? No wonder she’s half crazy. Now in three minutes I expect this house, and the garden too, to be clear of every one of you except Sarah Baker.’

In one minute and a half every vestige of a human form had disappeared from the

Manor, with the exception of Mrs. Hayes, Annie, and Mrs. Baker.

‘Now, Anne Pontin,’ said Mrs. Hayes, ‘the sooner you get into bed the better.’

‘When are they going to bring Jesse?’ asked Annie, still trembling, flushed, and faintly rebellious. ‘I don’t want to go to bed till they’ve brought him.’

‘Nonsense,’ returned Mrs. Hayes. ‘Mr. Shepherd’s sending a cart, but they probably won’t be here till quite late this evening.’

Annie allowed herself to be put to bed, and Mrs. Hayes went home. As she passed through the village, where the whole population was standing about in groups, discussing this and every other catastrophe that had ever occurred within the knowledge of any one, her mind was unusually disturbed—disturbed as her house might have been if an earthquake-wave had passed under it, temporarily disarranging the furniture. To-morrow everything would be put straight again, but to-day she had a passing consciousness that the world was not so obviously justifiable in all its arrangements as it usually appeared to her.

Meantime Annie lay on the bed, like a person in a fever, tossing from side to side, with little moaning sighs. It would have been excruciating to any one with nerves to sit by and listen to the ceaseless tossing, the ceaseless sighing; fortunately Mrs. Baker had none. She lit a fire for company, and sat over it, dozing from time to time. About ten o'clock a cart stopped outside, and there was a heavy tramping below. She started up.

'They're a-bringing him,' she said.

She would have liked to go down, but she was afraid lest Annie should follow. However, to her surprise, Annie did not offer to go, even after the men had gone. She lay quite quiet now.

'Mrs. Baker,' she said presently, 'please do go home. You couldn't get much sleep here with me, and there's no call for you to sit up tiring yourself.'

'Lor, Annie Pontin!' cried Mrs. Baker, 'you can't think as I should go and leave you alone all night with the corpse.'

'Oh, what does it matter?' answered Annie,

with suppressed impatience. 'I don't want to be uncivil, but I'd really rather be alone.'

'I might sit downstairs,' said Mrs. Baker doubtfully; but she did not particularly fancy the prospect of spending the night with the mangled remains of poor Jess.

There was a struggle, in which the arguments of Annie were greatly assisted by visions of a hot supper and a familiar feather-bed, which presented themselves alluringly to Mrs. Baker's mind's eye.

'Well, you're an odd girl,' she said at last. 'I'm sure I couldn't abide to be left like that. But you must have it your own way, and if you're taken bad in the night it's but a step to my house.' Then, kindness once more prevailing over selfish relief, she kissed her. 'Now don't you spend the night fretting and hurting yourself and the little one. It's a terrible thing when any one you cares about is took sudden like that; I know it well enough, and no one could have fretted more than I did about my poor Jim. But there! the Lord in His mercy don't allow things to last with us that way. Just you think as

you'll have a hearty boy afore long, as'll work for you the same as his father did. Bless you! a boy ain't none the worse for being a love-child. My Jimmy as was took, he was; and there never was a son as was kinder to his mother, if he was a bit fond of his glass, poor fellow. Good-night, my dear, good-night.'

CHAPTER IX

IT was a profound relief to Annie to hear the door close after worthy Mrs. Baker, and to be alone for the first time since this strange horror had befallen. To-night she must realise all it meant, collect herself, make up her mind what to do ; to-morrow she would be surrounded, carried off by Mrs. Hayes or some one else, whither she knew not, unless she had a settled determination of her own. She partially dressed, and taking the candle went downstairs. As she opened the door of the lower room the light fell on a litter of straw and something lying on it, covered with a sheet. There was an indefinable awfulness about the veiled outline of the long white motionless thing. She stepped forward quickly and flung the sheet off the dead man's face. Yes, that was Jesse's face, set and

strange, but calmer and less painful than when she had seen it that afternoon. It would be comforting, she thought, to sit by him, she would feel less lonely, and perhaps the tears would come ; those tears which for hours had seemed to be burning and seething in her brain like liquid fire. It was not a year ago since the stormy night when she had knocked at this very door and Jesse had come down and taken her in. She had been miserable enough then, but her misery had been less absolute. She remembered vividly the comfort it had been to lay her head on Jesse's shoulder and cry and tell him all her troubles, and how good and tender he had been to her then and always—yes, always. She laid her head down now on the dead breast and began to sob, with terrible hard tearless sobs.

‘Poor Jess! poor Jess!’ she whispered.

Only last night, holding her in his arms, he had said how well he was beginning to feel, and told her again what a lucky fellow he thought himself, and how he never dreamed of being so happy as that, when he came out

of the workhouse school. And to-day he had been snatched away out of the life he had cared for so much by a cruel death, made more bitter by the thought that he was leaving her and her child in imminent danger of falling victims to that Union which was to him the embodiment of evil. 'Poor Jess! poor Jess!' She lay there sobbing, and whispering her love and grief and pity, till suddenly, as she kissed his face, its iciness thrilled through her, and she felt that the coldness of the corpse, striking through the cotton shirt, had chilled to the bone the cheek she had been resting on its breast. In a moment its strangeness and impersonality were borne in upon her; its severe impassivity, its utter indifference to all that she could say or do or feel or suffer. It was not Jesse who lay there, it was Death himself, the King of terrors. There seemed something unnatural and sacrilegious about these endearments, this passionate sorrow, and replacing the sheet with trembling fingers she fled upstairs.

When the thrill of awe and fear had

passed, she said to herself that the night was wearing on, and that she must think what to do. She sat down in the old bee-hive chair in which she had slept the first night she had spent at the Manor. 'You mustn't let my child go to the workhouse.' That was the injunction Jesse had laid upon her. How was she to fulfil it? She had money in the house, but scarcely enough to carry her on to the time when she expected her confinement, certainly not enough to cover her expenses then. She would be wholly unable to prevent their sending her to the Workhouse Infirmary. And if she so far outraged her own feelings and disobeyed Jesse's command as to allow their child to be born a pauper, what was she to do afterwards? She would leave the Infirmary burdened with a child, without money, without a character, and without friends. Without friends! That was the bitterest part of it all. Turn where she would, she could see no one in the least likely to give her effective help. Her thoughts did not even touch on her uncle and aunt, and speedily dismissed Mrs. Hayes. Nurse

Mary was somewhere on the sea between this and India, as lost as though she had sailed for another planet. The schoolmistress who had been so kind to her in London was married and gone she knew not whither.

It was, as I have said, a misfortune to Annie to have been born in a higher and more provident class than that into which she had fallen, and also to have a clearer and more educated intelligence than is commonly found in her own. The semi-destitute are a great and not wholly unhappy family of Micawbers. Had she belonged to them she would have at once decided to live by taking in needlework—although she might have had every opportunity of knowing how short a cut is this same needlework to starvation or the streets. But Annie had not only seen, she had observed the struggle for existence ; how hard it is for the robust respectable woman who has a child to support, how desperate for one like herself.

Needlework ! It is 'taken in' at every other house in a small street ; it buys butter for those who have bread, but lucky and few

are those who can feed and warm and clothe themselves and their children by it. Annie, it is true, had no ordinary powers of mere good stitching; if some kind-hearted energetic woman, such as are common as daisies in our English land, had known of her talents and her sad plight, she might have been put in a fair way to earn her bread, and butter too. But they knew not of her, nor she of them, nor did she realise that there was more in her fingers than in those of all the other women she had seen toiling and struggling and falling around her. No. Like some wild creature caught in a trap, and hearing the cruel hunter's steps drawing nearer and nearer, she sought round her desperately for some loophole of escape from this darkness into the light and movement of hopeful purpose. But look where she would there was nothing to be seen but a black hopeless wall of misery. Her child would be taken from her, brought up in the dreary prison of the workhouse school, and turned out into the world despised, friendless, fatherless and motherless. Motherless, because she herself would be a stranger

to him, either in the Union, or toiling somewhere as the drudge of a coarse mistress, who would overlook the blot on her character, if she were allowed to pay her less on account of it. All her shame came back upon her mind with crushing weight, mingled with impotent exasperation against the cruel fate which had bound its burden irrevocably upon her at the very moment when it seemed about to be lifted off. It felt heavier now there was no longer any living creature besides herself who knew and understood all the circumstances of her step aside from the path of respectability. Our notions of our own personalities are so largely gained by the reflections of ourselves we see mirrored in the eyes of others, that Annie's self-respect was involuntarily injured by the consciousness that now in the whole world there were no longer any eyes which could reflect back to her an unsullied Annie; the victim not of passion, but of injustice and ill-fortune. The impudent bloated face of Mr. Solomons and his coarse words kept reproducing themselves in her mind. Ah! why had she minded the

shame, when Jesse was there to protect and believe in her? Now every insolent brutal man she met was at liberty to insult her, without even being blamed for it. What would become of her? What could she do? She peered forward into life and saw nothing but abysmal darkness.

‘You mustn’t let my child go to the work-house. I’d rather a thousand times we were all dead together.’ The words returned to her with an illuminating flash, and she stood up with a kind of ‘awful warmth about the heart,’ a feeling of trembling and exultation. Here was the solution of the problem, to find which she had been beating her brains for half the night. She had found it at last, just as the gray dawn was creeping in at the window; and it was so simple, so absolute. She did not stay to ask what manner of death she should choose; simultaneously with the idea of self-destruction had come the vision of the long glittering lines of the railway, and the thundering, rushing train. Throwing on a shawl, she opened the door on to the staircase. For a moment she paused, still holding the

candle in her hand, glanced round the room, and laughed a low triumphant laugh. Let the world awake in an hour or two ; let Mrs. Hayes and the rest come here with their management and their hollow consolations—she would have escaped, be gone and free from them for ever. She felt curiously exhilarated, like some thrice-wretched Cinderella, who has been left to wait for the step-sisters' return among her ashes, and to whom a sinister fairy-godmother has unexpectedly appeared with the promise that she too shall go to the palace of the king. This sense of exhilaration overcame her awe as she passed through the lower room, and standing at the feet of the corpse she addressed without uncovering it.

‘It’s all right, Jesse,’ she said, ‘we need none of us go to the Union. There’ll be money enough to bury us if they sell the things, and we’ll all lie snug in the church-yard.’

Then she went out into the drear chill twilight of dawn. As she walked swiftly along the Horsley road her whole being

was bent to one end. She was not thinking at all ; but she was conscious of the hot blood seething and drumming in her ears, and occasionally of passing some familiar object dim and mysterious in the dusk. When she came to the windmill there was a band of clear cold light round the horizon, just touching the lower edges of two thin black bars of cloud. The dark bulk of the mill, untouched as yet by daylight colours, the diagonal lines of the sails etched themselves against the pale distance and the brightening sky. There flashed before her eyes a vivid picture of Albert, laughing and dancing in the path as the express rushed through the station. She closed them for a moment and tossed back her head, as though to shake off the odious, importunate vision, and hurried on, her mind once more absorbed in her purpose.

When she reached the bottom of the hill, she turned off in the opposite direction to the Horsley station. In a few minutes she came to a level crossing, but though there were no signs of life in the little house by the side of it, scarcely higher than the hollyhocks and

sunflowers in its garden, the high gates closed across the line on either hand effectually prevented her from gaining it at this point. With a feeling of petulant annoyance at the obstacle she began to follow a rough lane running parallel to the line. Presently the hedge on one side stopped, and there was nothing between her and the railway embankment except a strip of waste land. It was rough with tufts of brown-tasselled rushes, and patched and striped with russet colour and bright green, after the manner of marshy places ; even the hot summer had not dried it. She plunged across the spongy ground, through the dank white fog that hung over it, and reached the embankment. Somehow she had expected to find a train rushing to meet her as soon as she arrived, and she experienced again a movement of petulant disappointment as she looked up and down the line and saw and heard nothing. The sun was now half above the horizon, brightening the low wreaths of mist that floated along the valley and the stretch of pale water to her right where the rushes and shimmering

willows blended imperceptibly with their own reflections. No one but herself seemed stirring, or even breathing, in this silent, beautiful world, yet she knew that in reality she might at any moment find her way of deliverance blocked by some stupid remorseless fellow-creature. Going to the foot of the bank she sat down under a bush which screened her from the sight of any one who might look from the level-crossing. A nervous impatience devoured her, a longing to have done. Sitting quiet there, she could not be so absolutely passive in her mind as she had been while she was walking on to a definite end. It occurred to her that she ought to say a prayer, but she could think of nothing to say. To people brought up in the habit of prayer it becomes an instinct ; many who have deliberately abandoned it find themselves in some crisis of their lives falling on their knees and calling on a God whom they do not for an instant believe can either hear or help them. Annie had always heretofore taken it for granted that He existed in some remote conventional way ; but she had not

acquired the faculty of praying as a child, and now she seemed powerless to do so. The talk of London artisans of the higher class who had come to see her father—talk which she had heard years ago, and never thought of since—came back to her mind. They said that there was no God, and that when we died it was for us the end of all things. She hoped it was so ; she only wanted to have done with everything, and sleep. But up at High Cross no one, from Nurse Mary to the worst and poorest man in the village, questioned His existence. Ah ! Nurse Mary would be sorry for Annie and Jess when she heard about it a long time hence ; there was a little pleasure in feeling that. At any rate if there was a God who knew about her, He would also know she had not wanted to be wicked, and that now she was doing the only thing left her to do. If He punished her in another life He could not make her suffer more than she was suffering in this one, and He would not punish her unborn child.

The far-off whistle of a train sent a shock through her. ‘Christ have mercy upon us!

Lord have mercy upon us !' she repeated, clenching her hands. The thunderous vibrating sound was coming rapidly nearer ; she got up, but she was trembling from head to foot, and her knees gave way under her. She was conscious of a great revolt of the flesh against the fixed determination of her will. The dull obedient body had allowed itself to be driven so far by the impetuous spirit, but now the end approached it started back shuddering with instinctive horror, like some beast when the doors of the slaughter-house are opened. 'No, no ! I *cannot* die !' cried the writhing flesh. 'You must, you shall !' answered the implacable will. So distinct were the two parts into which her being resolved itself, that they scarcely seemed to cohere. It was as though two persons were slowly climbing the steep bank ; one a condemned criminal, struggling in cowardly anguish away from her doom, the other an iron-handed warder, steadily dragging and pushing her on towards it. There was a taste like blood in her mouth, and the earth and sky were veiled in a reddish fog. She

could not see the train coming, but she felt sure it was now close to her. 'Kneel down,' said the unyielding will, and the faint and trembling body sunk on its knees. There was a harsh grinding noise ; the driver of the train had seen her and put on the brake, but it was too late. She was groping for the rails, like a blindfolded victim groping for the scaffold, and suddenly the mist about her changed into a thick black darkness, through which she went falling and falling into utter nothingness.

CHAPTER X

THE blue of infinite space, stretching away inconceivably high overhead, the silver of clouds, beaten thin by far-off winds, drifting and drifting across it. Was not this the brightness, the illimitable calm of eternity? No, it was only the morning sky, into which she lay looking up without any movement of mind or body. Gradually she reassumed her conscious being, and became aware that she was lying on the ground, out of doors, and that her hair was dripping, and her face cold and wet. With an effort she sat up, and stared stupidly at the scarlet poppies and yellow ragwort and small pink bindweed that flaunted beside her on the sunny bank.

‘Where am I? What’s happened?’ she asked herself aloud. A man in a dark green corduroy jacket and trousers, who was coming

up to her with some water in his cap, answered surlily :

‘As to what’s happened, you knows more nor I do—except so far as I see you roll down this here bank. I thought the train had knocked you down, but I don’t see no bruises. As to where you are, you’re on the Great Central main line, and a very great liberty you’ve took in coming here.’

Annie looked round and saw she was sitting half-way down the railway embankment. In a moment she recollected how she came there. She had passed through the agony of death, the jaws of the grave, only to come out into the old life, the old homeless world. She laid her head on her knees and began to shed hot tears of weakness and weariness and passionate disappointment.

‘I see very well what you was up to,’ the man went on after a pause, sternly, but not without signs of relenting. ‘And I tell you again as you took a very great liberty with our line. It ain’t right and it ain’t legal what you was after, young woman, and if I

do my dooty, I shall take you to the nearest police-station.'

'Oh no, you won't do that—please say you won't,' Annie pleaded; 'I've had so much to bear already, I couldn't bear anything more. I'll promise to go home and never to come here again, if only you'll let me off this time.' And she sobbed pitifully.

'Well,' returned the man more mildly, 'I don't want to be hard on you. I'm a family man myself, and I know there's plenty of women gets light in the head when they're in your way. There's a goods train just due, and if you'll come and sit in my house till it's by, I'll think the matter over.'

She followed him along the stony line, crying bitterly all the way, and sat down to wait for him in his little room, with the sunshine coming in at the window through the pink hollyhocks. There was a noise of gates opening and shutting, the interminable roll and rattle of a long luggage train, and presently the man came in.

'You seem a respectable young person,' he said—by which he meant, 'You're a nice-

looking young woman, and seem in a deal of trouble '—' and if you'll give me your word to go home and not come trespassing on our line again I'll let you go, and say as little as I can help about this here business.'

Annie gave the required promise, in a weary, listless tone ; nothing seemed to matter much. He took a cup out of the cupboard and poured something into it out of a milk-jug, and also out of a black bottle.

'You drink this,' he said—'and take a bit of bread with you, if you're in a hurry to be off. You ain't fit to go any distance,' he added, looking at her doubtfully. He would have liked to ask her where she came from, but there was something about her which forbade questions.

All that she wanted now was to get home unobserved and keep the secret of her failure. She thanked the man, and taking the bread in her hand, started off. The man's rough kindness and the nourishment he had given her had refreshed her almost against her will. Like a person recovering from a severe illness, who feels a pleasure in the everyday process

of living, however dreary Life in the abstract may appear to him, so she too, returning from the gates of Death, could not help relishing her crust of bread, and feeling a peculiar sweetness in the sights and sounds and scents of the summer morning, with its sunshine and dew, and intimations of re-awakening life. An old man was milking by a meadow gate, and lifted his head from his cow's sleek side to wish her good-morning as she passed. When she began to climb the hill she startled large and prosperous families of rabbits, taking their breakfasts on the short grass ; away went their little white scuts, flying over the turf in all directions, and disappearing into the gorse, and under the banks and the hillocks. After all, perhaps the village had not been wrong in thinking Sarah Baker the right person to comfort Annie. Last night the poor girl had been impatient of her presence and of her words, but now what Mrs. Baker had said to her about having a son came back to her with something like a gleam of hope. She began to think it just possible that the fainting-fit which had overcome her on the embankment

might turn out to have been providential. But for that she would have taken her child away from a life which he might come to enjoy as much as Jesse had enjoyed his. Supposing she had a boy, she could make a great struggle, and if she could not prevent his being put into the workhouse school, she would try and live near him and see him often, so that he might not grow up without any one to love. Then when he was old enough to work, they would live together. Perhaps he would grow up strong like Jesse, and quick and clever like her father, and be a prosperous man some day, as other boys as poor and friendless as he had come to be. But a girl—ah! that would be different. It was not worth toiling and suffering on through life in order to bear and rear another woman, to toil and suffer also. Nurse Mary herself had indiscreetly allowed that a woman's life was a poor affair for the most part, and that she did not think the little girls of the lower classes would lose much if Judgment Day came before they had taken their turn at it. If it was a girl?—well, then she hoped she

would be strong enough to resolve and act ; but now she seemed to have no strength to bear even the thought that it might be. It was borne in upon her that she was going to be the mother of a son.

The sails of the windmill that had looked so black as she went down glittered in the sun as she slowly mounted the hill. She got three-quarters of the way up quicker than she would have thought possible—but what was this ? She was not cold, yet her teeth were chattering, she was shivering and shaking from head to foot, and by no effort of will could she modify the access. It did not hurt, but it thoroughly startled her, and she almost wished she could see some one about. There was nothing moving except the rabbits and the spiders running along their bright bridges of gossamer, in the warm sunshine. She went on ; but she seemed to have lead on her feet, and to be walking up, up, an interminable precipice. At first, in the general sensation of weariness and strangeness, she hardly noticed the spasms of pain that begun to ache through her whole body, but by the

time she had reached the top of the hill she was conscious of active physical suffering. She sat down feeling as though it were impossible for her to go a step farther, but then it occurred to her what this anguish and extreme weariness meant. And she who a short time before had shrunk from her fellow-creatures, and had deliberately devoted herself and her unborn child to death, now mastered by the pangs of the flesh and its imperious instincts—the terror, the craving for human help and sympathy, which even the animals feel when the hour of maternity is at hand—now rose up and fled with all the strength and purpose that were left in her, back to the village ; back to those rough neighbours she had flung from her this morning, for all eternity, as she supposed.

Oh, if some one would only come along the road ! Many a morning carts and labourers would be passing at this hour, but the luck was still against her, and no one came. Staggering on, sometimes running for a few yards, sometimes falling on the roadside bank crying out vainly for help—oh ! would

it never finish, that long streak of white road, roofed with its streak of blue sky, between the high dusty hedges? She knew every inch of it, yet through the nightmare world in which she moved it stretched itself out for ever and ever, an unbroken interminable line.

At last, after hours, as it appeared, of horrible effort, she saw the familiar Scotch fir-tree and the high roof of the summer-house. She reached the carved doorway in the wall and looked in. Everything was quiet. Evidently there was no one there except the dead. She must go yet farther to Mrs. Baker's cottage, which was the first house in the village street, just beyond Pontin's farm. When she got as far as the stone cross she sunk down on the steps of it, opposite the farm-house. The Pontins were early people, and at that moment aunt was opening the parlour casement. Annie did not notice her; she did not think of the day she and Jess had been thrust out across that clean white threshold; every faculty was bowed under the tyrannous domination of bodily anguish. Rising, she went on to Mrs. Baker's.

She did not stay to knock, but hanging desperately on the stiff latch, stumbled in and subsided on a chair close by the door. Mrs. Baker with her husband and two grown-up children had just finished breakfast. She was full of excitement and sympathy and self-reproach at having overslept herself and left Annie so long alone.

‘But you was so quiet last night,’ she said. ‘I never thought as your troubles were coming on you.’

The husband and son were stalwart men, and quickly making a hammock out of a blanket, they carried Annie back to the Manor, Mrs. Baker following. James Pontin, who was in his farm-yard, came to the gate to look at the odd procession.

Old Master Godfrey, the village patriarch, with his stick and his white smock and his seedy beaver hat, was following it at a little distance.

‘Who’s that they’ve got there, Master Godfrey?’ asked Mr. Pontin, with natural curiosity.

It had been known in the village last

night that the Pontins had not helped their niece in her trouble; the obdurate one had been James, not his wife; for after all aunt was a woman. Public opinion, which had before been mainly in their favour, had now turned strongly against them.

Master Godfrey hobbled up to the gate.

‘It’s your niece Annie, Farmer Pontin,’ he answered. ‘She’s took in labour, and not a soul in the house with her except the dead Ay, poor thing! It’s a sad trial.’

James Pontin set his face like a flint.

‘As folks sow, so they must reap,’ he said shortly. His thoughts went quickly on to Benny, and he hoped the boy too might be eating of the bitter fruit of his ingratitude.

The old man looked up timidly in the face which from being merely grave and a little heavy had grown so immovably grim.

‘Ah, James Pontin!’ he said, turning away, ‘I hope it ain’t true as the Lord sticks at forgiving us as we forgive them as trespass against us.’

A week after Annie’s return Mr. Evans

was standing at the Manor door waiting to mount his mare. He was waiting because Mrs. Hayes, coming along the road with the inevitable soup-tin, had held up from afar a mandatory hand loosely swathed in a brown cotton glove.

‘Good morning, doctor,’ she said when she came up. ‘I want to know what you’re going to do with Annie Pontin. Here’s Solomons—a wretched old sinner the man is, too—insists upon turning her out. In that case she must go to the Union at once. After all, she’d have to go there sooner or later.’

Mr. Evans was young, and still excited about his cases. He brought his hand down on his mare’s sleek shoulder with a slap that made her dance.

‘Solomons daren’t do it,’ he said. ‘I’ve warned him it’s as much as the girl’s life’s worth.’

‘He told the nurse last night he meant to, all the same,’ returned Mrs. Hayes calmly.

‘She’ll die and I shall prosecute him—I should like to prosecute him!’ cried the fierce doctor.

‘People fuss so nowadays,’ replied Mrs. Hayes. ‘Why, dear me! my sister was always up and about by the time her babies were a fortnight old.’

Mr. Evans looked unutterable things.

‘You don’t consider,’ he said, ‘this girl had a delicate constitution to start with, and now, of course, it’s smashed up. The wonder is how she’s pulled through the business at all.’

‘Why, what’s the matter with her?’ asked Mrs. Hayes.

‘Nothing’s the matter—everything’s the matter. She’s organically weak. Bother her and pull her about and she won’t be ill, she’ll just leave off living. That’s all.’

While her case was being discussed below, Annie was lying in bed in the upper room of the summer-house. Mrs. Baker sat in the bee-hive chair with the baby girl on her knee; for the event had not justified Annie’s presentiment that the child would be a boy. The district nurse was in the house a good deal, and by Mr. Evans’ directions slept there; but when she was out Mrs. Baker would often

come and sit with Annie. Neither she nor the nurse could make the girl out at all. She hardly ever spoke, but lay still hour after hour, staring before her with great cavernous eyes. She did not seem much interested in the baby when they laid it on the bed by her. She would look at it in a fixed sad way, and once or twice said 'Poor little thing,' as though it belonged to some one else; but she never talked to it. She had asked where Jesse was buried and nothing more.

Mrs. Baker was not fond of silence, and as the baby lay on her knee stretching out its tiny feet to the fire like the most prosperous baby in the world, she said :

'Lor, how nicely she's getting on ! She's beginning to fill out her skin, that she is.'

'Do you think she will live, Mrs. Baker ?' asked Annie, turning a worn strange look on the matron.

'Live ? Of course she will,' Mrs. Baker answered—'live and be hearty.'

'Poor little thing !' said Annie again. 'It would be happier for her to die, wouldn't it ? Life's so hard for us poor folks.'

‘Of course it’s hard,’ returned Mrs. Baker indignantly, ‘but we gets used to it, and we likes it. It ain’t right to be wishing your baby dead, and if you talk so, Annie Pontin, I shall think you’re a wicked girl as wants to be rid of the trouble and shame of it.’

The weak tears came into Annie’s eyes.

‘Oh, don’t scold me, Mrs. Baker,’ she cried, ‘I can’t bear it. It’s not that I want to be rid of the baby, but I don’t want to leave her to the Union and no one to care about her. It would be much better if we was both dead.’

‘The doctor says you’re going on as well as can be expected, and there ain’t no call for you to die,’ returned Mrs. Baker severely. ‘I’m sure it’s wonderful how the Lord in His mercy have brought you through all this, seeing you always looked so as if the wind ’ud blow through you.’

There was silence while Mrs. Baker was engaged in wrestling with the white ribbons of a minute pair of knitted shoes, which Annie had insisted on having put on the baby’s feet because Nurse Mary had made them. It had

been in vain to tell her that for a baby of a week old to wear shoes was clean against all the sumptuary laws which regulate infant apparel.

There was a loud rattat-at on the door below, and popping the baby into the bed, Mrs. Baker went down. Then a colloquy began in the lower room, gradually assuming the character of an altercation ; a man's voice deep and bullying, and Mrs. Baker's raised in wrath and indignation. At last, with a final volley delivered from both sides at once, it ceased, and there was a sound of heavy waddling footsteps followed by the roll of departing wheels.

'Well, of all the brute beasts I ever see, that Solomons is the worst !' exclaimed Mrs. Baker, re-entering Annie's room. 'To come here and talk about turning you out o' Friday, with the corpse, as you may say, hardly across the threshold, and you being as you are. I says to him, "Mr. Solomons, don't you know as doctor says you're as like as not to kill the girl?"—"Bless you, I don't put no faith in them doctors," says he. "She'd be a deal

comfortabler in the Union. I give notice last week as I'd got a new tenant for this house."

Mrs. Baker stopped, terrified at her own impulsive indiscretion, but Annie did not seem agitated.

'Do you think he'll do it so soon as all that?' she asked.

'Lor, my dear, I don't think nothing,' returned Mrs. Baker hastily. 'Nor don't you trouble your head neither. There's the doctor or some one 'll see to it.'

That night the district nurse, who slept in Annie's room, was summoned away to the mother of the idiot; a woman in an advanced stage of disease, who was expecting her thirteenth child. She lived at the opposite end of the village street to the Manor, near the church and the Hall. About six o'clock the next morning the nurse and the doctor stood outside the cottage door. The former had to appear at a coroner's inquest that morning, and as she passed the Union on her way, she was to send Mr. Evans up a temporary nurse and some necessaries from the Infirmary.

As they stood there they saw Albert coming along the churchyard path. He looked particularly dirty and unkempt ; probably he had not been undressed the night before, but had curled himself up to sleep in some corner and stolen out as soon as the day broke. Moreover he seemed to have got some unusual plaything which amused him exceedingly. It was a long-shaped bundle, which he kept holding up in the air and rocking in his arms. At last, with a yell of glee, he laid it down on the top of a flat tombstone. A feeble cry, like the yawling of a weakly cat, reached their ears.

‘Whatever *have* that boy got?’ asked the nurse crossly.

Mr. Evans had long-sighted eyes, and he looked earnestly.

‘By Jove!’ he exclaimed, ‘I believe it’s a baby.’

Then he set off running to the churchyard. The nurse saw him in brief pursuit of the ungainly boy, who, instinctively foreseeing an assault on his person or property, dived away among the hillocks and stones. Mr. Evans

seized him and removed the bundle from his arms, firmly but carefully, Albert's boots meantime making considerable acquaintance with the doctor's shins. Then Mr. Evans came back to the cottage carrying the bundle.

'Here, nurse,' he said, 'just warm this little brat and give it some milk. There are no bones broken, but it's squalling like anything, poor little beast, and no wonder. Where on earth can it come from?'

The nurse in amazement took the baby, glanced at the shawl it wore, and then at its feet. A tiny white shoe was on one of them.

'Lor, if it ain't Pontin's baby!' she exclaimed. 'How ever did he get the child?'

Mr. Evans gave a whistle of dismay.

'Then that young ourang-outang's been frightening the mother into fits,' he said. 'You wait here, and I'll be back as soon as I can.'

And he started off up the village street at a sharp trot.

When he came back he was panting and hopelessly bewildered. 'She's gone!' he

gasped—‘disappeared—not a soul in the house. Most extraordinary!’

The nurse was feeding the baby with a spoon, in a skilful, professional, wholly uninterested manner.

‘Just like them hussies!’ she sniffed. ‘The quieter they are, the deeper they are. I always thought Pontin was deep.’

‘What the deuce can have happened to her?’ soliloquised the doctor. ‘I’d have taken my solemn oath she couldn’t walk ten yards.’

‘Folks can mostly do what they pleases,’ returned the nurse. ‘I dare say she’d more nor one string to her bow, and as soon as she got the chance she’s gallivanted with somebody and left her brat to the parish.’

‘She can’t be far,’ insisted Mr. Evans, ‘unless some one’s carried her. I shall just go across to Mr. Hayes. But what’s to be done with the baby? Upon my word I’ve got my hands pretty full this morning.’

The nurse shrugged her shoulders.

‘There’s trouble enough in this house already,’ she said. ‘It can’t stop here, and it’s got no relations to count. It’ll have to

go to the Union ; and if I was you, sir, I'd just let it go straight off. I can carry it so far, and there's Jones in the Lying-in Ward as lost her baby the day before yesterday. It was just the age of Pontin's, and they've had a deal of worry with her and will be glad to let her take to this one—so the sooner she has it the better.'

The doctor was bothered.

'Very well,' he said. 'It can't do any harm. If any one wants it it's easy to fetch it back, and it will get a breakfast anyhow.'

The nurse was in a hurry and started off. The path by which she was going led across the churchyard, down some steps under the branches of the great yew, through a wicket, and so over the fields. The doctor also had to cross the churchyard to reach the Vicarage. When he was half across, it struck him that the Hayes' were not exactly the sort of people to appreciate going out into the wilderness after lost sheep at six o'clock in the morning. He paused and wandered aimlessly under the yew-tree, looking after the nurse with a slight qualm at the summariness of

the step he had taken. She was already a good way down the hill ; there was an indefinable something about her way of shouldering the baby, her stiff back and rough gait, that would have prevented any observer from mistaking her for a mother, or even an interested person.

It was a very fine morning, as fine as the morning little more than a week ago when Annie had walked up from the level crossing. A heavy dew lay on the nettles and rough grass of the churchyard and on the meadows, where the shadows of the trees and hedgerows lay long and cool. He saw on one side the flat country, with its corn-fields all pale in the early sunshine ; on the other the view was partly blocked by the bulk of the old Hall and its many elms. The blue smoke was beginning to curl up from one of the big chimney-stacks above its brick gables. Below them was a long moat-like fish-pond, much deeper than the one in which the horses were watered. The field sloped to it suddenly, making a steep bank, and all round stood great elms. As he looked, the gray far-off

hills seemed floating in the air between their branches. Then his eye was caught by a figure moving out from under the shadow of the churchyard wall, and making for a small white object that lay on the grass in the direction of the pond. It was Albert. He stooped and picked up the white object, which Mr. Evans then saw to be a baby's shoe. He remembered that the foundling had had but one, and it suddenly occurred to him that Albert might be of some use in tracing its mother. He stood in the shadow of the yew to watch. The idiot broke into a shuffling run, and disappeared down the bank under the elms. Mr. Evans followed, noticing as he went that there were already several tracks through the dew. As soon as he reached the bank he saw a woman lying on it immediately below him; she was lying straight on her back with her feet towards the pond. The idiot was crouching close to her with his arm across her breast, peering in her face and jabbering to himself. A sudden, dreadful thought came into the doctor's mind. He stepped quickly down, and the idiot moved away as quickly

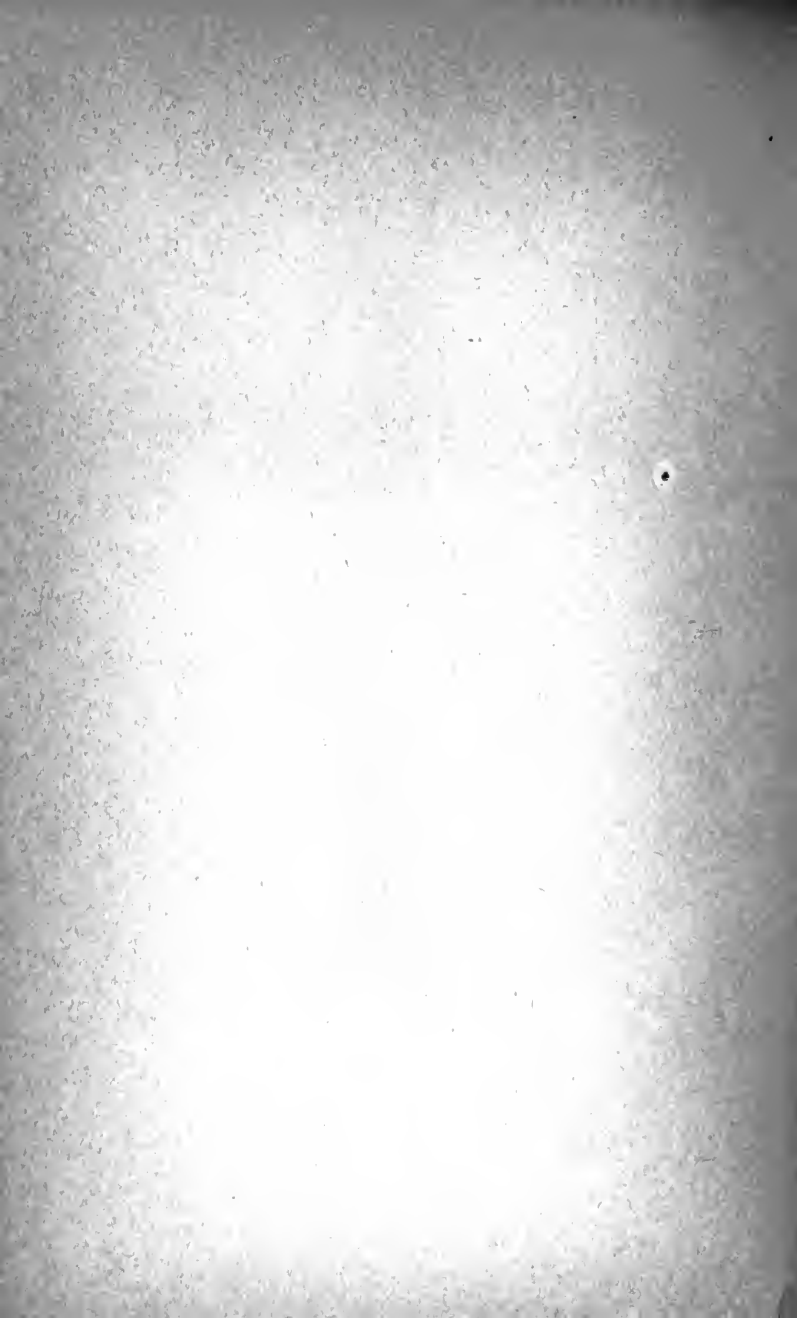
with a howl of terror and annoyance. It was undoubtedly Annie, and she was equally undoubtedly dead, but there were no marks of violence on the body. She had slipped on a skirt over her nightgown, a pair of shoes and a shawl, and had evidently, from the position of her left arm and hand, been carrying the baby. By some supreme exertion of the will she had struggled so far with it, probably intending to lay herself and her child under the deep waters of the pond, when suddenly her strength had failed her and the end had come. Albert must have found or followed her, and carried the child away from its mother's body. There was a look of painful effort stereotyped on the dead face; the square white teeth were clenched, the brows drawn together, and the glazed eyes very wide open, staring up into the clear morning sky. Her right hand still clutched a handful of coarse grass which she must have caught at in her fall. The eastern sunshine was filtering through the elms on the other side of the pond a long narrow ray slanting across it fell on her white night-

gown and her white young throat, another caught the gold ring on her left hand, which lay across her breast. The doctor was standing quite still now, and Albert forgot to be afraid. He crept up close again, and kneeling by the corpse, moved the left hand. He touched the gold ring once or twice with his finger, grinning meantime and scratching his chin with his other hand, then stopped short, as though half-frightened at his own audacity. But in a minute he took hold of it again, leering up in the doctor's face as he did so.

'Not here, Jess,' he said with his slow, thick utterance ; and throwing back his head with a loud chuckling laugh, ' Jess not here,' he repeated, and pulled violently at the ring. It sprung off into his hand, and at the same instant Mr. Evans seized him by the arm. As quick as thought he ducked his head, and his strong teeth met in the flesh of the doctor's wrist. Freeing himself thus from the grasp of his captor, with a cry of rage and spite he threw the ring over his shoulder as hard as he could throw it. For a moment

it turned and glittered in the air, then with a faint splash it disappeared, and a tiny circle of ripples, widening and widening till they touched the grassy bank, disturbed the dark surface of the pond.

THE END



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